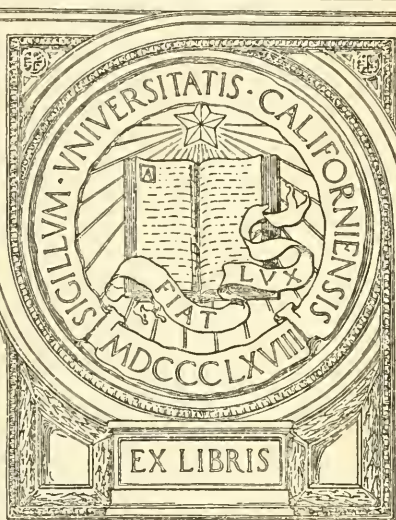


# FUNDAMENTALS OF FICTION-WRITING

ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
AT LOS ANGELES



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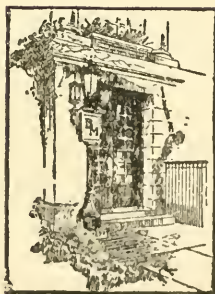


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*By*

ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN



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To  
JAMES H. GANNON  
Whose Understanding Cooperation Has  
Made the Application of These  
Principles a Pleasant Task





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# FUNDAMENTALS OF FICTION WRITING

## CHAPTER I

### BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

LIVING in so complex a civilization, we generally fail to realize how complex have become our mental habits. We have come more and more to think upon complexities until, for the most part, the more elementary facts, processes and approaches are slighted or omitted as beneath the high development of our minds. However learned our thinking may be, its foundation must be elementary thinking, and, if elementary thinking is neglected because it seems too elementary for attention, the result is likely to be unsoundness of the whole structure because it has been erected on unsound foundation.

Add to faulty thinking habit the human ten-

dency to accept as established what has been handed down to us by our thought predecessors, dead or contemporaneous. Progress can be made only to the extent this tendency is overcome by chance or guarded against. Guarding against it requires particularly the close scrutiny of elementals.

It is particularly unfortunate that, the specialists of course being the most complex thinkers of us all, we have allowed our habit of specialization to leave to them more and more the guidance of general thought, thus drifting further and further from elementary methods of thinking.

The more thoroughly you analyze modern thinking methods and their results, the more evident becomes the damage done.

Simplicity is the key, but, being rather proud of our complexity and advancement, we have become such strangers to simplicity that we even distrust it when we meet it. It is most pitiful of all that a mere outward show of complexity gains more respect than does a simple essential unadorned. Yet it is true. Almost automatically simplicity produces in us a reaction of contempt, a feeling that our highly developed minds have long

ago passed on beyond such childish matters. We are too advanced to bother over the elementals and the result too often is much frantic "progress" along wrong paths.

In the course of my editorial work it impressed itself on me more and more that there was somewhere unsoundness in both the editorial basis of criticism and the writers' basis of creation. Being afflicted with the prevalent complex method of thought, it was only gradually that I came to suspect that the unsoundness traced back to some of the elementals all of us seemed to be taking for granted. My suspicions have grown the stronger during the years of "laboratory" work, at some points ripening into convictions, so that in this book intended to be of practical service to writers of magazine fiction they will inevitably show. They must, therefore, be labeled in advance as departures from the usual dicta laid down, so that the reader can make allowance accordingly.

While my personal history is unimportant, some of the details that may indicate, or that seem to have influenced, the theories developed have place in this book as guide-posts in valuing or discounting it.

It is, for example, only fair to make plain in advance that I am probably far less familiar with books on how to write fiction than are most beginners who may read this book, and probably know—or remember—less concerning the dicta of critics and other authorities on literature in general. On the other hand, in view of the probable reaction to some of my unacademic views, I claim the right to state that these views do not result from lack of academic training. Also a brief statement of my experience as editor and writer seems called for by way of warrant for my venturing to advance any theories at all.

I have been an editor more than twenty years, a magazine editor for nearly twenty, serving on seven widely different periodicals—general, specialized and fiction—*Chautauquan*, *Smart Set*, *Watson's*, *Transatlantic Tales*, *Delineator*, *Romance*, *Adventure*. At intervals during that time I have contributed fiction and articles to *Everybody's*, *McClure's*, *Bookman*, *Country Life*, *Delineator*, *Smart Set* and half a dozen others. Previous to this there were nearly three years as editor of a country weekly and two years of teaching English and literature in high school. I spe-



cialized in English at one university and added some graduate work in fiction writing at another.

As a child my home influence was decidedly literary, even to a point that might be designated "highbrow," with the natural flavoring of science rather to be expected in a house largely occupied by my grandfather's microscopes and shelves of specimens. In a word, my early training was decidedly academic, and as a "cub" I came to the magazine "game" spelling "literature" with a very large capital "L" and with more than the usual cub reverence for books and magazines and all that pertains thereto.

Like the majority of magazine editors, I found that my first task was to shove most of my academic training and point of view into the background, making of them an accessory rather than a guide, and adopting an altogether new scale of relative values. A few months accomplished the greater part of the change, but it required years to develop suspicion of that new and commonly accepted scale, to ripen the suspicion to conviction and to build up a third scale to take its place in my work.

Before entering the magazine field, I remember only one questioning of precepts and tenets. About 1900 I refused to read any more authors "for style," realizing I was against my will absorbing too many of their individualities, Stevenson's sentence-rhythm in particular imposing itself on my literary efforts to a decided degree. "Style is the man" seems to have been one of the textbook statements that sank in deepest, and it gave me courage to rebel against another of its kind.

In my college course three things stand out as strong in influence. All were encountered in work of the thesis class conducted by Professor Joseph Villiers Denney with a sound judgment and breadth of view that were bound to be stimulative and give permanent value. First, laboratory experiments upon the class itself showed us, to our great surprise, the tremendous degree of variation in individuals as to the quality and degree of their imagination-response to the printed or spoken word. I have met few writers or editors who had any conception of this variation or who had even given the matter a thought, yet it is of basic importance to both.

The second idea outstanding from my college course is the explanation of the psychological appeal of fiction given by George Henry Lewes to the effect that man finds enjoyment in fiction because by following the fortunes of the hero or identifying himself with him he can attain vicariously the perfections and successes he can not attain in real life. I have not seen it for twenty-four years and may have distorted it, but the idea as stated has been the one acted upon.

Third, there was Spencer's economy as a basis of rhetorical theory. I remember nothing whatever about it except that he included economy of the reader's attention. To what extent this phase of his idea is responsible for my own theories I do not know. Memory tells me I recalled it only after working out my own, but it is reasonable to hold it a cause though an unrealized one.

*Analytics of Literature*, by L. A. Sherman, made a decided impression on me during college or in the years immediately following. Undoubtedly I gained much from it, but at present I am unable to state its content in any but the most vague way and can not detect any but academic influences from it, though

in this I may be doing it serious injustice. De Quincey's *On the Knocking at the Gate in "Macbeth"* made vivid the use of relief scenes. From some book by Brander Matthews I learned that the short story should have only one point.

Five years after college I read Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* Read it with interest, resentment, bewilderment and enthusiasm. It was the first real blow to my unquestioning acceptance of all the usual canons of art. The impress was tremendous, but, quite in keeping with my miserable memory, the only definite, abiding impression I can identify is the emphasis laid on simplicity, with the corollary that creative work must reach peasant appreciation if it is to be classed as art. Years later I came to attach more and more importance to simplicity, arriving at that attitude by paths leading from practical experience—laboratory work, as it were, paths that to my vague recollection seem not at all those of his approach, but I can make no exact measure of the extent to which Tolstoy may have done my thinking for me or at least influenced it. Probably the influence is far greater than I realize.

In any case, the above are the *total* of the outside influences. It is, of course, impossible for any one to live in contact with his fellows in a world filled with type and opinions without absorbing ideas from others, but in the sense of influences sufficiently definite to make conscious impress I can add nothing to the above list. In nearly twenty years, if I have read any book or article dealing with the philosophy of literature I do not recall the title or the occasion. Five or six years ago I read a third or half of a book that taught the writing of fiction, but laid it down because it was too difficult for me to understand and seemed not in accordance with my own ideas. I have never read any other text on fiction writing, though I have spun the pages of a number of them to gain a general idea of methods and theories, finding only the usual ones.

This lack of reading authorities was at first due to lack of time, but for years I have carefully avoided the influence of others' theories to the best of my ability so that I should not be diverted or forestalled in an effort to work out my own. Naturally, most of the accepted theories and methods are current because

they are sound, but there is a minority of cases in which a dissenting view seems warranted.

My warrant for dissent is that to a very great extent the main faults (other than those due to lack of natural ability) in the fiction submitted to magazines seem directly due to faults in accepted theories and methods. These faults in theory and teaching may be roughly summarized under two heads:

- (1) Assigning to readers theoretical reactions based on traditional editorial and critical precepts instead of basing editorial precepts on actual reactions of readers. In particular, lack of emphasis upon preserving the illusion.
- (2) Overwhelming writers with demands of technique and academics and thereby doing all possible to ruin individuality and real ability.

For getting data on the first of these points I have been exceptionally well situated. More than any other magazine on which I have served, more than the half dozen others under the same roofs, more, so far as I can judge, than any other magazine I know,



*Adventure* gets definite, concrete response and criticism from its readers. So far as the male sex is concerned, probably no other magazine has a more generally representative audience, ranging through all classes from the highest to the lowest brows. The great number of letters and talks resulting from this keen personal interest of its readers in the making of the magazine has been invaluable in giving its editor, for more than ten years, the actual, specific reactions of readers, as opposed to the theoretical reactions that accepted editorial theories assign to them.

The overemphasis on technique and academics I consider the most harmful factor at work in the field of American fiction, from both the literary and the magazine point of view. I can claim no special equipment for speaking on this point other than a decidedly academic training followed by over twenty years of practical laboratory work, and arrival at conclusions by abandoning all accepted precepts and going back to the simple elementals.

The object of this book is not exploitation of theories but practical service to writers and

would-be writers. It is aimed directly at the faults that are the chief causes of rejection of manuscripts by magazines and book houses. General theories are used chiefly to give foundation and perspective, so that a writer, knowing the general ends in view, may be enabled to solve intelligently and consistently even those problems in his work that can not be covered specifically by any "book of rules." It is a crying need that writers should learn to work less by rule of thumb and more from a general understanding of what fiction really is and of what determines its success. For twenty years I have watched the flow of manuscripts—more tens of thousands than I like to remember—and am year by year more convinced that more embryo writers of appreciable ability are ruined by an overdose of technique at the hands of their literary doctors or by slavish copying of the work of some "successful" writer than by any three other causes you please to name.

Technique, naturally, should be a means, not an end. In most of the teaching of the day so much emphasis is placed on it and such large quantities of it are shoved down the beginner's throat, before he has developed

himself sufficiently to digest it instead of merely chew it, that in a majority of cases he loses himself and his talents in an empty struggle with formulas and formalities. He may learn to chew very well indeed, but the odds are that he isn't chewing anything and that he has starved himself to death. As a matter of fact, he has ceased to *be* himself.

Perhaps the reason for this overemphasis on technique is that those responsible for the books, classes and correspondence courses designed to help the budding fiction writers are, with very few exceptions, chiefly theorists with no great background of either actual editorial experience or an even fairly considerable accomplishment in writing fiction. Those who have both, even a moderate degree of both, are so very few that in number they constitute only a fraction of a per cent. of those at work in this field. The teachers of fiction, a good many of them, give extremely valuable service, but the majority of them either approached their work from abstract and academic beginnings or, having sold fiction themselves, built too much from their own experiences, knowing too little of the many different paths by which others must

progress. Both groups seem to have been too much influenced by technique and academics in general.

The editors, too, for the same and other reasons, have contributed toward making technique too great a factor. It is physically impossible to give individual criticism to every manuscript that comes in, or, when given at all, to give it fully in all cases. Almost never are the reasons for an acceptance given and only in a general way at best. As a result, writers in their early formative stages are left in the dark unless they turn to the other teachers. Much of the criticism given by editors, too, is academic and centers on technique—because that kind of criticism is easier for us to give. Still again, we often mislead a writer by failing to distinguish carefully between the needs and likes of the particular magazine as opposed to those of magazines in general.

Whatever the reasons for the exaggerated part technique plays in American fiction, it is the chief hope of this little book that it may to some degree counteract this curse of formula and encourage beginners to more direct effort for individuality and a more natural expression of it.

Perhaps this is not a book at all, but merely a collection of talks. Certainly there is little attempt at carefully unified structure. Its writing must be done at odd moments, for I am still in editorial harness. Also it will be done only in such moments and manner as make the writing of it a pleasure rather than a task.

I use the pronoun "I" without stint or apology, for that is the natural method to follow when one person speaks to another and, while I object strenuously to an author's obtrusion of himself into his fiction, the first personal pronoun in books of exposition is often of distinct advantage in precision as well as in ease and clearness.

Finally, this book is not meant for geniuses. They should by all means march their own paths, finding or making their own methods, each to his taste. Though this is a book of suggestions, not of rules, the genius does not need it. But wait,—alas! half my possible readers are gone from me at the ending of that last sentence, self-dismissed as indubitable geniuses. I'd forgotten that the writing world is composed chiefly of geniuses, most of them indubitable and—self-dismissed.

But *you*—I think you'd better read on until you find stronger reason to turn away, for, to be friendly frank, the odds are so very heavily against your being a genius. As for me, I don't even know more than three or four geniuses at the very most and you can be entirely at your ease in my quite ordinary society.



## CHAPTER II

### A GENERAL SURVEY

LET us take a general survey of what is to follow, beginning with fundamentals.

*The Art Process.*—The art process of fiction involves three elements—the Material, the Artist and the Reader. So far as my experience and observation go, the Reader is not regarded as a part of the art process and in both theory and practise fails to get anything approaching due consideration. For that reason his part in the art process will receive full treatment in this book, while Material and Artist, being already amply covered in thousands of texts, will receive more cursory treatment. The reader can, nevertheless, be made a complete basis of both rhetorical and fictional theory. Almost any important element can, for that matter; it is merely a matter of choosing the point from which you shall look at the circle. The reader's having been

hitherto slighted in this respect is alone sufficient reason to choose him if for no other purpose than that of viewing the art process from a new angle and thereby getting a more balanced concept of it. Personally, I believe the reader's angle the correct one, being the final step, the test of the other two.

Philosophers will at once quarrel with both my theory and my terminology. If they will confine their quarreling to the field of philosophy, they may settle the issue as they please. Must a genius think only, or at all, of his readers when he sits down to write? Probably not, but this book is not written for geniuses, who need no rules or guidance or at least think they do not. Certainly either genius or plain human will fall into ruin if he thinks overmuch on rules and regulations of any kind when he should be giving himself up to creating. But I've noticed that even geniuses generally revise their work after its first launching in ink. Why?

Must art be seen or heard by others before it can be art? Naturally I realize that the Venus de Milo was a work of art before it was dug up, but what of that? It was only a potential work of art from any practical point

of view and of no good to any one until brought where material and the artist's work on the material could continue and complete the process by creating in human beings the thoughts and emotions they strove to express. In that word "express," by the way, lies the whole divergence of theory. Theories have made it practically subjective only, ignoring its objective side—the recipient. Can you, outside the most abstract abstractions of philosophy, express anything without expressing it *to* some one? If you think you can, how are you going to be sure that you have expressed it? Who is to be the judge on this point? You, the artist, alone? Perhaps the philosophers can show me my position is untenable, but they can't show me one single fiction editor in all the world who wouldn't throw up his hands in despair at the very idea of letting every "artist" be the judge as to whether he had expressed what he thought he had expressed. Even non-editors, who haven't been tortured by the mistaken idea of "artists" that they have succeeded in expression, would be more than slow to admit the artists themselves as competent judges or to abide by the artists' judgments.

Consigning abstraction to the background, you are a fool if you put into material what no one else can get out of it. And I'd say that you were not a genius, the two terms not being mutually exclusive, for a genius—at least all whom the world has been able to discover—does not fail to convey his message to at least a few.

To how many people and to what grades of intelligence must the artist convey his message in order to prove himself an artist? I do not know. Neither, I think, does anybody else. There seems almost equal disagreement as to the character and quality of the message to be conveyed. But I can see no doubt that some message must be conveyed to somebody and it would seem that the greater and better the message and the more the recipients, the more successful is the work of art.

On the practical basis that the would-be fictionist wishes to sell his fiction to the magazine or book houses, it follows naturally that as a first step his success will be measured by the number of people to whom he is able to convey his message, the thought and feeling he desires to express. After reaching them, it of course becomes a question of the quality

of his message, but that quality can be known only by those readers reached by it. It becomes a question, also, of the degree to which he reaches them.

But first, and most of all, he must reach them.

*Clearness.*—It follows that the prime essential is clearness. If they are to get his message at all, they must be able to understand what he says. If they are to get it fully, he must express exactly what he means and do so in such manner that they will understand it exactly as he means it. This may seem too elementary for consideration. It isn't. The theory is readily admitted but not sufficiently practised. The guiltiest are often the most unconscious of their guilt, for it is a common serious failing of writers to believe that because they have made things plain to themselves they have made them plain to others.

Clearness is not merely a question of unambiguous sentences, though the majority of writers do not successfully mount even that simple hurdle. Clearness includes supplying all necessary details, suppressing the unnecessary ones, giving to each the proportionate emphasis you wish the reader to give to it

and seeing to it that his response is exact, and so shaping your presentation of the story that the reader *must* follow the exact path you have mapped out for him.

*Other Essentials.*—A valuable accessory in attaining clearness is simplicity. But most writers abhor simplicity, apparently because being simple seems to them to ruin their chance of being “literary.”

Clearness, simplicity, force, but the last two of this old trilogy of the rhetorics are really included under clearness in its full meaning. So, too, perhaps, are unity and structure. In any case, all are necessary in getting the writer’s message to his readers.

Shall I sound hopelessly elementary and banal when I say that, to register his message in full force, the author must enlist his reader’s sympathies? Yet the majority of those who attempt fiction either give this necessity no thought or are unbelievably crude and stupid, not only missing chance after chance to secure this sympathy, but continually and needlessly alienating it. I do not use “sympathy” in its sugary sense, but shall attempt no exact definition in this chapter of preliminary survey.

As essentials for the securing of the reader's sympathies may be included unity and structure—in some of their phases more properly included here than under clearness.

Also, he must economize his reader—carefully regulate demands on attention, thought and feelings according to a human being's normal ability to respond as well as according to the varying needs of different parts of the tale.

*The Illusion.*—Lastly, to convey his message fully, he must *impose and preserve the illusion of his story*. In this are really included all the necessities named, even clearness. And, I think, all necessities that can be named. This, it may be said, *is* fiction—the imposing and preserving of an illusion. I make it the basis of this book because it offers what seems at present the angle of approach most needed in teaching the successful writing of stories, in correcting the faults most common and most fatal, and in providing writers with a consistent and comprehensive theory that they can apply to their needs and problems as these arise.

Itself a return to the solid foundation of underlying elementals, it has the very practi-

cal merit of compelling writers to make the elementals the constant test of their work. Necessarily involving a constant and careful consideration of the reader, it seems the best remedy for the greatest weakness in fiction writing—the tendency to limit the art process to the second of its three steps, Material, Artist and Reader. If the third step can be helped to its due share of attention, the first step can wait its turn, at least so far as the successful writing of magazine and ordinary book fiction is concerned.

Do I then mean that the prime object of fiction is the imposing of an illusion? That here lies the test of fiction? That no fiction is written or read or valued except for its success in creating an illusion? The imposing of an illusion is the object and test of fiction *as fiction*. Fiction serves many purposes. It may teach something, show something, what you please. But for these things it is only a vehicle, and the test of it *as a vehicle* lies in its success at imposing an illusion.

As to whether my theory of fiction is “new” and “revolutionary” I can offer only that it was new to my experience and revolutionary only in that, in the actual editorial work of



helping writers develop their abilities for fiction, it has seemed to effect results that no other theory was able to effect. I might add, also, that the fiction department of a Coast University, having come across some of my correspondence with contributors, wrote me that the fully developed principle of preserving the illusion had not, to their knowledge, been elsewhere advanced, that they had adopted it as a regular part of their course, and that it had satisfactorily stood the test of several years. On the other hand I have learned, even since the actual writing of this book was begun, that for several years Doctor Dorothy Scarborough has taught this principle to her classes in short-story writing in Columbia University.

As to the newness of dividing the art process into the three steps of Material, Artist, Reader, I can not say. So far as I know, it is my own idea, the joining together of two lines of thought on which I had been working. On the other hand, I should be amazed if others had not previously advanced the same theory.

*Literature vs. Magazine Fiction.*—What distinction do I make between literature and magazine fiction? In fundamentals, none.

Only a small percentage of magazine fiction is literature in the distinctive sense of that term. That so little of it is literature is partly due to the arbitrary and entirely non-literary restrictions imposed by the magazines with their various aims as to types of audience. Some will not accept unhappy endings, some bar sex questions, some use no stories of foreign lands, some demand action, some permit no mention of drink or tobacco, some will have no "problems," some require a breezy, sophisticated style, some must have this, some abhor that. Most writers must sell what they write or stop writing through lack of means or lack of tenacity. Naturally they generally strive to make their goods acceptable to the market, writing with a careful eye on the likes and dislikes of the magazines and all the more harassed and limited because what is one magazine's meat is another magazine's poison.

Some, like Sinclair Lewis, Talbot Mundy and others, fully realizing the situation and keeping their heads, write what they know will sell, write it as well as they can under the limitations, and keep on writing it until they have attained sufficient standing and finan-

cial foundation—and sufficient mastery—to write what they wish and in the way they wish. But the vast majority become permanent slaves in the galley where they must serve their apprenticeship, perhaps growing very skilful in handling one oar among the many oars but hopelessly unable to paddle their own canoe.

If money success is essential or preferred, by all means draw a sharp distinction between literature and magazine fiction and, unless you are quite sure your talents are considerable, confine yourself to the latter. On the other hand, granted sufficient ability, aiming at the former may very well carry you further in every way. If what you wish is, regardless of worldly success, to write the best that in you lies, forget everything else, including the restrictions of the magazines.

Another cause of the scarcity of literature in magazine fiction is that writers, editors and readers become obsessed with fads, generally of a superficial nature, as to style, or treatment, or types of material. Underneath this is a more fundamental cause—the habit of imitation. O. Henry wrote and died and even yet the mails are full of manuscripts

.

from writers who are trying to write O. Henry stories—and can't, for the simple and everlasting reason that no one of them is O. Henry. Every John Smith of them would do better work if he wrote John Smith stories, but lots of them are still selling O. Henry stories because editors too are still under the O. Henry spell or know that many of their readers are. Kipling, Doyle, James and other famous authors have each their army of imitators, many a sheep-like soldier serving in several armies at once.

Nor do the imitators always aim so high. Any writer popular in the magazines, no matter how ephemeral his vogue, serves them almost equally well. The lowest depths are reached when the model is no one in particular but merely a composite of all that is most hack and usual on the printed page.

Not long ago there arose again the fad of beginning a story with a paragraph of philosophy. It has spread like a disease and, I think, is one. There were—or are—the era of glittering sophistication in style, the *Dolly Dialogues* and *Prisoner of Zenda* eras, doublet and hose, business, sex, Stevensonian rhythm, and so on.

But all these fads and other limitations serve only to lower the proportion of literature in magazine fiction. Neither they nor anything else creates any fundamental difference between the two. Both are fiction, both subject to the laws of fiction. And even that magazine fiction beyond the pale of literature is aimed, somehow, at the reader and is to be judged on that basis.

## CHAPTER III

### CREATING THE ILLUSION

BY CREATING the illusion I mean making the reader forget the world he really lives in and carrying him into the world of the story, either identifying himself with one of the characters or looking on and listening entirely absorbed in what he sees and hears. The illusion is wholly successful, fully effective, only if the reader is made to live altogether in the story world. He must forget that he is a reader, that he holds a book or magazine in his hands, that the story is merely a story instead of actual happening. He must forget that there is such a thing as an author; he must forget the method and manner of telling in the telling itself. He must *live* the story.

*The Illusion and Its Hold.*—Naturally perfection of illusion is not generally attained, and naturally what holds some readers in

thrall may not hold others. The more sophisticated the reader, the more difficult, other things being equal, to make him lose himself utterly in the story. Probably, too, the more fiction one has read, the less readily is one swept away into the story's spell. The same obstructions hold in any art, or in eating or any other pleasure. The penalty of sophistication in anything is further removal from the direct, elemental appeal. The penalty of satiety and overuse is a dulling of response. But these facts do not alter the matter of what the appeal is.

But do not the sophisticated get more out of fiction—out of the “highbrow” fiction they tend toward—than do the unsophisticated out of the same fiction? Get more what? More of the finer shadings undoubtedly, but less of the elemental appeal. And is it really fiction they are reading or something else mixed with fiction, and is it from fiction or other things they draw pleasure or edification? Their attitude is at least partly that of a critic rather than a recipient; their interest in “What is happening” is at least partly distracted to “how it is written.” From fiction itself, from fiction as fiction, the unsophisti-

cated, granting them understanding of the words they read, in most cases get a greater intensity of appeal than do the others. Understand, I am speaking not of general sophistication but of sophistication in fiction.

*Fiction a Vehicle.*—As you run over in your mind various writers of acknowledged rank you may feel that, in face of that rank, illusion is an unsound basis of test and comparison. The stumbling-block is that much of what we call fiction is not pure fiction but a hybrid, a cross, a half-breed or even a quad-room—fiction plus an essay, treatise, study, sermon, analysis, philosophy, satire, propaganda, a performance in technique, an exhibition of style, what you will. It is often the other element or elements, or the combination of elements, that appeals and that gives rank and value. There is no reason why writings should not be read and written for the sake of these other elements or of the combinations, but such writings are not pure fiction.

In such cases fiction is used not for itself alone but as a vehicle for something else. The wagon and its load may be more pleasing and valuable than the wagon alone, but



only the wagon is fiction and therefore it is with the wagon alone that we are now concerned. No matter how good the load may be, you can not carry it unless you can build and drive a good wagon. Probably the majority of writers will profit most by giving their whole attention to the wagon, partly because they haven't a sufficiently valuable load to put in it and partly because they need their undivided effort to make the wagon fit to carry anything. Certainly it is sound for ninety-odd per cent. of fiction writers to master their vehicle before they attempt hauling messages and information in it.

This book deals with straight fiction only. Straight fiction may of course include analysis, philosophy, technique, information and all the other things for which it is so often made the vehicle, but if it is to remain straight fiction, these must be really integral and necessary parts of it—analysis of or by the characters themselves, the information inherent in the material, the technique necessary for presentation, the philosophy of a character, locality or nation. Having sufficiently mastered straight fiction, a writer is infinitely more likely to be successful in registering on

his readers whatever it is he may wish to convey through fiction as a vehicle. His message may be so interesting or important that people will seize upon it eagerly, no matter how crude or weak the fiction-vehicle may be, but it would reach them all the more strongly if the vehicle were a competent carrier.

*Illusion the Essence of Fiction.*—The very essence of straight fiction is the creation and maintenance of an illusion. That this truth has been so largely lost sight of is due largely to the frequent mixture of fiction with other things, so that the mixture, instead of fiction itself, has tended to become the model and standard. If American writers are to make more rapid progress toward real success, they would do well to segregate fiction and study it for itself alone.

*Illusion Easily Shattered.*—Successful illusion depends on an infinite variety of things, is as sensitive to breakage as is a bubble and, once broken, though it can be again created, its strength is irremediably impaired. A writer of any merit can impose his illusion, yet often he does so apparently through instinct only, without evidence of carefully con-

sidered knowledge and intent. Certainly it is maddeningly common to see him again and again destroy his illusion, if only temporarily, with some "little" flaw that would almost unconsciously be avoided if he had clear conception of the fundamental importance of perfect and uninterrupted illusion.

The importance of maintenance of illusion can not be too much stressed. As a reader can you keep yourself within the spell of a story you are reading if you are subject to constant physical interruptions—conversation directed at you, people coming in and going out, loud and sudden noises? No more can a reader keep himself within the spell of a story if he is subject to constant interruptions from within the story itself. How can a story maintain its spell over you if you are again and again reminded by its text that it is, after all, only a story, somebody's words typed on the pages of a magazine you bought at the corner stand?

*Costliness of Breaking the Illusion.*—Each such interruption or reminder does its share in wrecking the illusion, each compels the story to begin over again in the business of making you forget your world in its world, each leaves the remainder of the illusion the

weaker. Even a single one in a story works very appreciable damage to the illusion as a whole, lessens the net result of the story's impact upon readers. Instead of the story's registering one hundred per cent. of its value, it is, as a result of a single break in its illusion, likely to register, not ninety-eight or ninety-five per cent., but eighty-five or seventy or sixty per cent. There can, of course, be no exact measure of the loss in the story's effectiveness, of the amount of failure in the third step of the art process, but very surely this loss is almost universally underestimated or altogether ignored.

Whatever the value of your story as fiction, you can not afford to have its one hundred per cent. reduced even five per cent. in its register upon your reader, and the instant you remind him that he is still merely himself in his same old world—or, even worse, make him momentarily a critic instead of a reader—you seriously damage the illusion and lessen your story's effect. The break may occupy only a fraction of a second's time, the reader, after a few paragraphs may forget all about the break, may even be wholly unconscious at the time of its effect upon him, but

the harm has been done nevertheless. It can be no comfort to the writer that the reader doesn't know why the story failed to register its full strength; the important point is that it did fail.

Some breaks in the illusion accomplish even more harm than letting the reader escape from the story's spell, since it is always so easily possible to lose a reader's sympathies or, worse, let him fall into a critical attitude, or, worst of all, cause him irritation or arouse his hostility. If, in reaching the reader, a story loses part of its value by merely letting him get from under its spell, the loss is still greater if it loses his sympathies, for even when he is again brought under its spell he can not possibly be so wholly given over to it as he was before. If you have made of him a critic—well, how much sympathy has a critic? If you have irritated him, naturally your chances of pleasing him are sadly diminished, since you must overcome a heavy handicap before you can even begin to do so. And if you have made him your enemy, you may as well bid farewell to any chance of your story's success. No matter how good the first two steps

of that story's art process—Material, Writer—if the third step—Reader—can not be taken, then nothing has been completed except an unrealized potentiality.

*Need of Emphasizing the Illusion.*—And yet, when it comes to the actual writing of fiction these practical, common-sense, vital facts are unrecognized or forgotten to an almost unbelievable degree. Day after day the magazine offices are rejecting manuscripts that would have been accepted but for the failure of illusion. Generally the editor calls it "unconvincingness." Year after year class-room and text-book go on teaching plot, style, characterization that go for naught if they are unable to register upon the reader. Year after year writers, oppressed with rules and abstractions, laboriously build pieces of machinery and expect readers to take these obvious, clanking collections of bolts, girders, wheels and cogs for something that is alive. Why not? They've been taught to consider only the making of a perfect machine according to formula. They find the magazines heavily laden with machines and are the more convinced that machinery is the ultimate attainment. Little teaching do they get that

helps them put the breath of life into their stories or gives them the habit of seeing also from the reader's point of view! They "try it on their friends"—God save the mark!—their friends respond or pretend to and the problem of the reader, if it arose at all, is satisfactorily settled for all time.

But mustn't they be taught plot, etc.? Of course. But plot, etc., are merely tools. A man may be passing skilful in the handling of chisel and mallet yet fail dismally as a sculptor. Plot, etc., are necessary, but they must be taught, not as abstractions, but as reasoned and reasonable outgrowths of something more vital than they.

*Individuality Crushed by Rules.*—Some writers escape from the net or are too big to be caught in it. These are in a painful minority. The tragedy is in the host of those who had sufficient talent and individuality for a moderate success but never attain it because their talent is diverted to formulas and their individuality crushed by academics.

Those who escape do so generally through either disgust or despair. They sweep the rules away or turn their backs upon them and—go ahead on their own. One advantage

gained thereby is instant, inevitable, automatic, for they have made an all-important step forward—being no longer ridden and haunted by formulas and rules, the writer at last has *a chance to live the illusion of his own story* and therefore a far better chance of making the reader live it.

The following is part of a letter from a writer who appears in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *McClure's* and other magazines of that grade. Years ago he used to send me well-made but colorless and formal stories. During some of the years between he had done no writing. Then he sent me one of the new kind. Amazed at the remarkable improvement in his work, I asked him what had happened. In his reply the omitted name is that of a magazine:

In those days I was rigidly following the rules of what I call the ——— school of the American short story.

——— stories and the stories of the school which it dominated, were all like Fords. They were of limited horsepower, neat, trim and shiny, taking up very little road space, structurally correct and all following the blueprint without the slightest deviation. There weren't any big powerful Cadillacs zipping along, or any dirty, greasy trucks hauling huge burdens and disturbing and upsetting



the normal run of things. It was an endless highway just jammed with Fords.

The —— story, from a standpoint of construction, was astonishingly well done. It had a beginning, a middle and an end, but few intestines anywhere along the route. The workmanship was wonderful. It was astonishing how many people there were who could write such beautiful English. There was one punch, one climax, which was very carefully led up to, and that was all.

Well, I tried to follow the rules as apparently laid down. I agonized over each word and sentence to get 'em just exactly *right*. I have sat at my typewriter for an hour to get just the few syllables that their standards seemed to demand.

The Hades of it was that the reader was being cheated all the time. He got a lot of very fine writing, but not much story. It was like sitting down to a dinner where the appointments were perfect, the water clear and ice-cold, the napery thick, the glassware thin, flowers on the table, an orchestra, perfect service, and not enough food for a canary-bird. In other words, a race of bird-shot stylists was being propagated who could write beautifully about an ant-hill but hadn't the equipment to do anything for a mountain.

I trailed along because I didn't know any better and because I hadn't been waked up and shaken down. I had lived, but I had not assimilated and correlated my experiences.

Now his present method, and if your nose is inclined to turn up at his idea of style, before you let it, make very sure that he

hasn't taken the one sure road to the only kind of style worth any one's having. And note carefully what he says about the outside of the motor-car:

I try to give the reader a lot for his money. I don't try to do any fine writing. Only one of a million of us can be a polished stylist. I'm not that one, but I think I can evolve a story and tell it. So there is no more agonizing about the style. I try not to make the outside of the motor-car which bears my people all gold and shiny and flower-decked so that the countryside will look at the car, and not at those it contains. I just try to make it a good, suitable, unobtrusive vehicle which will start and get to the journey's end without any tire trouble or backfires. I try to imagine real people—very often they are friends and acquaintances whose mental reactions I have noted under circumstances similar to those described in the yarn. And I try to visualize every important scene before I set it down. That is, I shut my eyes and see the people as though I were looking at a scene from a play.

And it's just a joy, under those conditions, to write. To go to my machine with the keenest anticipation. It is the finest sort of an adventure to translate a good story and send it on its way. I write much more easily and I think less artificially than in those days of deadly correctness—and dullness.

There are thousands of other cases—proved, not yet proved or never to be proved—of writers whose individuality has been

crushed out or whose success has been prevented or delayed by the present academic and unhuman methods of teaching the writing of fiction, by forgetting the illusion and the reader for the sake of the *means* of securing them. Here is an example so extreme that it must in fairness to other teachers of fiction be labeled as the last word in formula. It is, nevertheless, only the usual method fully and relentlessly developed. It is taken word for word from the teacher's printed statement of his "mathematical rule" for plot:

If the thread A, or viewpoint character, figures with the thread B in an opening incident of numerical order "n" there must follow rapidly after the opening of the story an incident n-plus-1 involving threads A and C, an incident n-plus-2 involving threads A and D, an incident n-plus-3 involving threads A and E, and so on, up to perhaps at least n-plus-4 or n-plus-5; and furthermore, n must produce n-plus-1, n-plus-2 must be the result of n-plus-1, n-plus-3 must be the result of n-plus-2, and so on.

That formula is, I dare say, sound and, if sound, undoubtedly useful. The teacher sells his own stories regularly to magazines and, as he is an apparently successful teacher,

probably numerous pupils of his are doing the same. (It is stated that his output for the last five years was about one million words, with sales of about ninety-six per cent.) Yet I think you will agree that his formula leaves something to be desired.

If I have talked overlong of Reader and Illusion in their general aspect it is because I have found that, while some writers grasp the idea at once, a minority seem incapable of seeing any possibility of difference between what a writer intends the reader to get and what the reader really does get, incapable of believing that they have not expressed in full and with perfect exactness all that they saw and know and felt when writing, and incapable of conceiving any reader who would not be spell-bound by their stories and in full sympathy with every shading and inflection whether real, imagined or flatly reversed in expression.

The interrupters and destroyers of illusion are almost infinite in variety and number. The means of avoiding them, indeed, constitute a complete set of working rules for the writing of fiction—better still, a basis from which a writer can draw his own rules to

meet all occasions as they arise. They may be very roughly divided into classes, the small, cruder interruptions that are comparatively detached and temporary and the more fundamental, organic and permanent ones. Most of the latter being treated, though from a different point of view, by the usual textbook, the smaller ones are in greater need of consideration and will be taken up first.

It is understood, however, that definite classification is not attempted and that the division into sub-groups is for convenience only. An item in one group may belong equally in several others and will often be treated under more than one.

## CHAPTER IV

### YOUR READERS

READERS of course vary in susceptibility to the illusion of fiction—vary in concentration, reading method, background of culture and of experience in life, familiarity with the ways and habits of fiction, critical attitude, imagination, particularly strength and quality of imaginative imagery, and in everything else that makes up mentality and individuality. Must the writer satisfy and hold all these from one extreme to the other? Yes, if he is to do perfect fiction. Possibly perfect fiction exists, but fortunately readers can be more or less divided into classes or types, each class capable of being very roughly characterized as a unit. The more classes reached and satisfied by a story, the better the story.

*Be Clear as to Your Audience.*—The fiction author can follow one of three courses:

(1) He can "just write," disregarding the question of who his readers may be and trusting that his style and methods may happen to be such as will win him an audience. This is an admirable method provided it chances to succeed. If it doesn't, he will have to abandon it for one of the others.

(2) Choose a particular class for his audience and aim directly at them. Naturally he will have to study his audience very carefully and know them rather thoroughly if he is to succeed. Limiting his audience, he limits the scope and therefore the degree of his success; a story satisfying the highest class can not be so good as if it satisfied both the highest and the next highest class or several other classes. It is entirely possible to do both, as Shakespeare and others have proved.

(3) Aim to reach as many classes as possible. Here, too, he must study and know his audience. Obviously it is a higher aim than the second, demanding more of the author. Having a larger audience to draw on, it is likely to attain greater success as measured by number of readers, though it is always a nice problem to decide in a given case

whether more readers can be secured by playing for your share of the majority, against all competitors, or by concentrating on a minority, against fewer competitors.

Considering carefully these three courses, it is necessary first to know your audience and keep them very definitely in mind, unless you are willing to write wholly from the subjective point of view and go it blind as to your audience, taking the extremely long chance that your substance and style may happen to satisfy a sufficient number of readers. It generally doesn't. Second, it is advisable to reach as many classes of readers as possible. Your task, then, is to know and to consider constantly as many classes of readers as you can. And knowing them means much more than having a general knowledge of their tastes.

*Fundamental Reactions Universal.*—Some will straightway object, "But I prefer to write for only the highest class of readers." It is their right to do so, and their choice may be a wise one. But I maintain two points. First, it is not the highest aim. Second, the writer who prefers this aim is probably most likely of all to fail to know his audience. The mis-



take to which he is peculiarly liable is that of forgetting that the highest class is not a thing apart but merely all the other classes plus something more. His tendency is to believe that they have passed on beyond all the tastes and reactions of the other classes far more than they really have. Most of all, he is likely to credit them with having risen above the cruder, more fundamental tastes and reactions of the other classes. They haven't. They have merely piled upon the fundamental reactions a larger collection of refined—and often artificial—reactions than have the others. The fundamental reactions may become somewhat blurred and aborted, are certainly less consciously active and generally less active in fact, but they are still there and still operative and sometimes in full strength. That is as true as any general rule that can be laid down concerning the human mind and too much emphasis can not be placed on it.

*The Target.*—To reach any audience perfectly you must reach them at all points, satisfying all demands, overcoming all their inherent obstacles, allowing for the varying equipment ranging from the lowest to the

highest among them—equipment of background, imagination, concentration, general intelligence and so on. And on each point you must reach those most gifted in it, most difficult to satisfy in that respect. It is not enough to satisfy those with little cultural background; your story must stand the test of those who have the most. It must reach not only those who set particular store by the delicate shadings, but those who demand a definite story interest. On any point you must aim to reach the individuals who are most difficult to reach on that point. In no other way can you hope to reach all.

It is not easy to do. In fact, it isn't done. But it must be the target aimed at. It is not easy to reach both the person who reads word for word, extracting the full flavor of each, and also the person who skips sentences, paragraphs and pages in mad pursuit of "what happens"; nor him who at a word or two from you reconstructs a whole scene in his mind's eye, and him whose imagination can vision for him only what you describe in detail. Yet, if you are to attain the degree of success possible to you, you must aim to satisfy in each such dilemma the extreme that for you is most difficult.

*Study Human Beings.*—First, last and all the time, success means study of the reader. That means study of human beings, not merely of opinions of them or of effects secured or apparently secured on them by other writers. The opinions may be mistaken; the effects may be there, but you and the other writers may fail to assign to them the proper causes. Strangely enough, the causes most often overlooked are the elemental tastes and reactions common to all normal humans. It is more “literary,” and more convenient, to study lists of “best sellers,” to read critical reviews and academic essays, to be given rules and standards by some one else—who got them from reviews, essays and “best sellers.” But it is human beings who are your readers. Get your data at first hand.

## CHAPTER V

### DISTRACTIONS

TO HOLD a reader in the illusion of a story it is of course necessary to hold his attention, not merely in a general way, but entirely and without break, interruption or hindrance. He must live wholly and *every instant* in the story world—must never be recalled for even the fraction of a second to the real world he lives in.

In writing any story there are a thousand chances of breaking the illusion by some little touch. Most of these are almost automatically avoided even by writers of small ability. Otherwise there would be no fiction. The point is that what are usually a very small minority are *not* avoided by most writers. The result is that editors are likely to reject the story because it does not “hold the interest,” is not “convincing” or “lacks punch.” Their finding is probably just, though they may not have analyzed for

causes, and the writer is not enlightened or even convinced of the finding.

*Disproportionate Damage from Distractions.*—Failing to avoid even an extreme minority of the chances for breaking the illusion is enough to injure the story very seriously. You can't afford to let your reader escape from the story's spell, slip back into the world he really lives in, even momentarily. For you have to waste at least a little of the story's potential force in getting him back again, which means that you can never get him back *quite* so fully as you had him before. You may even not get him back at all. You can't afford to have him become even momentarily a critic, for you must waste at least a little of the story's potential appeal in order to change him back from the critical attitude to sympathy and absorption. You can't afford to let his attention wander off to side-issues, for the story has to stop working at being a story in order to get him back on the main line and it needs every atom of its strength for the main job.

We recently published one of the best stories *Adventure* ever printed, a combination of simple narrative appeal and of literary

excellence of the first water. It is bringing us many letters of appreciation. To-day I read a long letter from one reader who had found in that story nothing, either good or bad, except that there was an indirect inconsistency as to one character's exact age. That was what you might call the *net result* of that story on a reader. All the strength and merit of an otherwise splendid story completely wrecked for a reader by that one trifling point! Undoubtedly others detected the same inconsistency but suffered less acutely or did not register their "kick." But in each case the appeal of the story lost strength out of all proportion to the size of the detail involved.

It is a typical, not an exceptional, case, except for the unusual merit of the story ruined. Thousands of letters like that come in from readers, often many on the same tiny slip or discrepancy. To those readers the story in question left as its chief impress upon them a violence—at one tiny point—to their knowledge of fact or sense of consistency. In each case how many other such readers are there who do not write us?

Other thousands of readers protest over

such slips, such distractions from the illusion, but are not so completely swamped by them, that they fail to consider the merits of the story as a whole. But, even with them, how big looms the tiny flaw in proportion to the whole! In each case how many other such readers are there who do not write in?

*How to Use Your Friends.*—No point that may distract a reader can be so small that it is not serious. You can not measure the harm done; in one case there may be no harm, in another a little, in another a great deal. But if writers who have their friends “criticize” their stories would ask these friends to give less attention to “literary” points and take careful note of every little thing that in any way attracted attention to itself or sent the mind wandering off to things outside the story, they would get some invaluable pointers—of the only kind that the usual friend is really capable of giving. If some day the colleges make systematic laboratory tests along these lines they should get data as surprising as they would be useful.

*Unusual Words.*—Consider how tiny a thing is capable of pricking the bubble of illusion, of jerking the reader for a brief

instant back into his real world so that he must be drawn again into the fiction spell. If in reading a story you come upon some such word as "pringle," "anodic," "calipash," "mansuetude," "spiracle," "frigorific," "cambist," "gibbous," "ortelic" you probably find it unfamiliar and, if so, of course know that you do. Therein lies the breaking of the illusion. However brief the total time occupied by your reaction to the word, however slightly you may seem to have paused over it, you *paused* and you paused over *it*—gave attention to *it*, not to the story. You had to *remember yourself*, your own knowledge and experience. Quite possibly you also considered the author's contrasting knowledge and experience, and the author is not the story. Possibly you tried to figure out the meaning of the word from its derivation or the context, or dredged your own memory for it, making your pause over it still longer. Perhaps your pause totaled only a few seconds or a fraction of one second, but—the illusion was broken and had to be rebuilt.

Far less unusual words than those cited will be unfamiliar to part of most audiences.



Would one such word do very serious damage? Very unlikely. But it would do *some*, and even a small damage is to be avoided if possible. Would four such words? There can of course be no definite measurement, but one thing is sure—*four would do far more than four times as much damage as one*. The effects are cumulative, following a kind of geometrical progression. And no one knows when a serious breaking-point may be reached.

Is a writer never to use a "big word"? Not if it's too big for his audience. In the mouth of a character he may put any word he pleases, provided it is used for sound purposes of characterization or for some other specific demand of the story itself, but not for the mere telling of the story. He might, for example, wish to impress a learned or scientific atmosphere. In this case, too, there is the saving fact that the reader need not know the meaning of these words, and knows that he need not, just as he would know he need not if he were actually living in the scene. He does not feel challenged by them. "Big words" may be justified in scores of typical instances, but there is no instance in

which it does not pay to consider whether the damage may not outweigh the gain.

Even an unusual word whose meaning is at once apparent to any one, like "cat-silent," should be carefully weighed as to advantages *vs.* disadvantages before it is used. And only in the rarest instances can there be justification for using such a word more than once in the same story, lest the recurrence added to the unusualness make a double distraction.

*Foreign Words.*—The same applies to words from foreign languages. Undoubtedly they are valuable in giving color, but this value is too often attained at too high cost in distraction and is frequently attainable through other means without loss. The damage they do is by no means theoretical, for readers do not hesitate to complain to editors on this score. I do not remember their doing so in the case of "big words," for naturally a man doesn't go to the trouble to admit he doesn't understand words in his own language, while often rather proud of not understanding foreign words. Sufficient color through foreign words can be gained by using only a few, even if these few are repeated, and by using only those instantly clear from

the context or from unmistakable similarity to the corresponding English word (like "*fader*") if context heads the reader in that general direction. There is comparatively only a slight risk in using those that are very generally known, like "*ami*" or "*mon chère*," also ejaculations that are evidently such and therefore make no demand on the reader's understanding.

*Classical, Historical and Fictional References.*—The danger, of course, is that the reader may not be familiar with the reference, knows that he is not, and therefore becomes conscious of himself as a reader. Another risk is that, being familiar with them, his mind drifts off to them more than the writer intended. Used with discretion, they may have value, but they are generally not used with discretion and, generally speaking, a story is the better for telling itself without covering part of the ground by means of what are practically quotations from other stories. Also, there are other dangers than that of simple distraction, which will be covered under other heads.

*Unusual Proper Names.*—To put this case concretely, here is the list of the male charac-

ters in one single story I read yesterday in a manuscript: "Tom Goit," "Braith," "Grahame," "Tim Stine," "Linus Kime," "Jestock," "Bissonet," "Heads," "Arnet," "Jimson," "Kliedjorn," "Jed Willoughby," "Andy Meenal," "Vard Sant," "Simson," "Angus Stell," "Gant," "Beezaw," "Colin Corbin," "Happy Falls," "Jim Light," "Rafe Gillen," "Charley Jance." It is probably not entirely complete, but was made by running through the pages and taking all names noted, usual or unusual. Can any human being read that story without having his attention distracted to the fact that those names are violently unusual? Doesn't the fact that they are unusual add an air of unreality to the whole story—story-book names instead of real people's names? Won't many readers be definitely irritated by the artificiality and mannerism? Aside from this and similar breakings of illusion it was a good story and will undoubtedly be printed somewhere. Its author is a successful writer of fiction. But hasn't the story lost very appreciably through that amazing collection of proper names?

On the other hand there is a certain advantage in the use of such names in some types

of story and for some audiences, though not in the story from which the above are taken or for the audience at which it is aimed. Some readers like proper names that are baldly fictional and unreal; that is what fiction means to them—unreality, utter difference from their own lives. These are much the same readers who like their stories filled with duchesses, earls and ancestral halls. A generation or two ago these were a rather large group, and larger still before that, but nowadays folks are more sophisticated in their fiction and need illusions that run more nearly with reality. And, at best, isn't it rather a cheap method of abnormality?

Unusual names serve also to make the characters more vivid to the reader's mind, but this method of characterization is a crude one that should give way to better ones entailing no risk.

In humorous stories of a certain type they are entirely legitimate. On the other hand, look carefully at your proper names lest, in a serious story, you give a character a name like "Hencastle" that brings a grin where you do not wish to have a grin.

Alliterative proper names are another

phase of the evil in the case of readers sufficiently sophisticated to note the alliteration at all.

Avoid proper names that are difficult or ambiguous of pronunciation. Don't give your characters the same names as those of real people prominent in the public eye unless a name is so common that it is not likely to distract the reader from the story's illusion through thoughts of the real person; even a too similar name is risky in some cases, *e. g.* any variation of the unusual name "Roosevelt."

*Dialect.*—While belonging more properly under later heads it serves, too, as a simple distraction in itself. Its advantages are obvious, yet some readers will read no story with dialect in it and some magazines will print none.

*Mistakes.*—A typographical error, a mistake in spelling, punctuation or English is sure to check and drag out of the illusion any reader who notes it. Such matters are definitely the editor's responsibility, but he is far from infallible and the author would, in most cases, profit by safeguarding against him. An editor will be grateful, particularly the assist-

ant editor who edits copy and reads proof. In our own office we can quote you lots of rules as to correct English—and show you violations of them in our own pages.

Mistakes in fact and statement will be considered later.

*Unusual Mannerisms of Style.*—Distinction is to be made between, on the one hand, individuality and deliberate shaping of style to attain a particular atmosphere or suit particular material and, on the other hand, mannerisms that are necessary to neither of these ends and harmful in distracting attention to themselves. No one can possibly draw a definite line between these two groups, but a warning is badly needed against forgetting the danger. It is a question for laboratory test. Try to get your friends—or better, your enemies—to read your story with this point in view, or do not mention it beforehand and cross-examine them afterward as to what mannerisms registered on their attention. And don't hand-pick your critics or "dogs" from any one class or group unless you mean your story to appeal to no other.

A novelette, which had to be rewritten because of it, used the following mannerism

hundreds and hundreds of times until each recurrence was not only a distraction but an agony: "he ran, and running, laughed aloud," "he sang, and singing, voiced his mood," "he fought, and fighting, worked toward the house." Another writer habitually, in the words following or introducing a line of dialogue, carries the legitimate "he said," "he urged," "he encouraged," etc., to such distracting extremes as "he frightened," "he anguished," "she informed," "he recognized," "he remorseful." Of late years there has developed the fad of saying "the heart, or soul, or head, of him" for "his heart," "his soul," "his head," etc. This variation from the usual has, in prose, a very limited field in which its advantage exceeds its damage.

A mannerism of style is warranted if it so fits into a story that it is an integral and practically unnoted part of it; otherwise it is a harmful factor. A better adapted mannerism could have gained the desired effect without making of itself an obtrusion.

*Fiction as a Vehicle.*—There are two ways of writing a story. One is to write fiction only; the other is to combine fiction with something else. Readers like both and both



are legitimate, but the latter is of course not pure fiction; fiction is merely the vehicle for the other thing or things. One of the greatest evils among present-day fiction writers is the failure to make this distinction and keep it clearly in mind. Too often a writer does not realize that there is anything else mixed with his fiction; consequently his product is not straight or well-built fiction nor is the fiction part of it a carefully made vehicle for the other thing.

To make fiction serve any end other than its own is very likely to weaken its value as fiction, and before a writer thus weakens it he should make very sure that the advantages gained from making it carry something else compensate for that weakening. If he wishes to give his reader, for example, some direct philosophy, well and good, but he should—and seldom does—weigh the attendant loss.

There is a second distinction that should be made. When I say “plus something else” I mean plus something else that is added as a load is put upon a wagon, not something that comes to the reader as a result of the fiction. To say in a story “a man may prosper exceedingly on a policy of utter selfishness, but, hav-

ing all his life taken without giving, in the end he gives for what he took" is putting a load on the wagon. To let the story itself say that, merely to tell a story that illustrates and brings home that truth without mentioning it specifically (unless through the mouth of a character), is only letting straight fiction perform a natural office, though a natural office that can be overworked at the cost of a well balanced whole. The former is the easier and less artistic method, and far too many writers follow it far too often. Its evil is that of any "load"—it breaks the illusion, tending to make the reader think of the person who hands him this bit of philosophy, of himself, of the world in general, instead of the story world only.

The present-day fad of opening a story with a bit of philosophy, though objectionable on another score, does little damage to the illusion, since it comes before the spell begins and may even serve as an intermediate step.

*Obtrusion of Author.*—This is a crying evil, a serious damage to the illusion. The author has no more business to appear concretely in his story than a playwright has upon the stage when his play is being acted. Once in ten

thousand times he may himself be sufficiently interesting to atone for the wreck of the story's spell; the other nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine times he is a mistake, a bull in a china-shop. The following, all taken from submitted manuscripts, range from crude to subtle obtrusions:

"At the time of which I wish to speak"

"you must understand"

"consider the case of John Holt. But first consider the environment"

"see him"

"and it is the correct word"

"it is necessary to add, in explanation of this seeming paradox"

"had, somewhat grumbingly, be it said,"

"he had, for instance, tried,"

"and disappears from this story,"

Each of these compels a reader to realize that some one is talking to him. You can't be carried away in a dream when conscious that some one is telling it to you. Sometimes the point is made that an author's obtrusion puts the reader on more intimate terms with him. What has that to do with fiction as such? If the author didn't obtrude himself, the reader would have no interest in intimacy or non-intimacy with him. If the author is the one out of ten thousand, all right; otherwise, not.

If a writer must express philosophy or opinions specifically, let him use the legitimate device of the first-person narrative, taking care that the narrator is cast in such character as to make these opinions natural to him. Or else baldly use fiction as vehicle only, making his story a *conversazione*.

There is another legitimate device. Kipling ends a story with "I think he was right." But he begins that story with "When I was telling you of." In other words, he tells the story in an undeveloped frame or brackets. Partly by leaving the frame undeveloped and impersonal, his skill is sufficient to make you feel that it is not Kipling himself who talks to you, but some unknown participator in the action of the story or an onlooker. It is really, in effect, a first-person narrative with the privileges of such.

First-person narratives, unless presented as addressed to a fictitious audience such as the narrator's children or grandchildren, of course permit a fairly free direct address to or at the reader, since the writer poses as the actual teller. Incidentally, however, it is not consistent with his telling what goes on inside the characters unless made plain to him as one of them.

As found in submitted manuscripts, the great majority of authors' obtrusions seem unconsidered, and are accompanied by the damage to be expected from walking in the dark. The remainder, almost without exception, seem ill-considered. One exception out of a thousand instances is not a heavy average.

## CHAPTER VI

### CLEARNESS

ANYTHING that is is not clear to a reader either causes him to skip it and therefore miss part of the story's substance and effect, or else makes him puzzle. In either case the illusion suffers. If he puzzles, he has to use up attention on a point the writer had counted on being clear, his mind is on the puzzle, not obsessed by the spell; the story's flow is stopped, the reader is conscious of himself, his difficulty and limitations, perhaps also of the author as the cause of his troubles—in a word, the reader has got away. Every time you confuse him you lose him. Deliberate mystification is a writer's prerogative; having all his plans upset by mystification where none was expected or desired is a calamity.

*Author's Ostrich Habit.*—Naturally enough, authors are inclined to a kind of reversed ostrich habit. If a point was clear to them when they wrote it, they take for granted that

it must be clear to the reader. They forget that they have full knowledge of all that is or happens in their fiction, while the reader can know only what comes to him from the printed page. Often when an editor points out an unclearness they argue with him, blissfully ignoring the fact that the editor is himself a reader and that the reader found it unclear. Possibly the author proves his case—that is, he points out other passages in the story which do clear up the unclearness if the reader remembers them and makes the correct inferences and connections. The fact that, in the actual test, these passages failed to produce the intended results on the reader slides off the author like water off a duck. Still less does he get the idea that a reader shouldn't be distracted from the story by being compelled to go into a more or less complicated reasoning process in order to get what should have been handed to him on a platter. Even if several editor-readers found the point unclear, he stands by his guns.

Aside from the author's vastly superior knowledge of his material and intentions, many of his readers may be his mental inferiors. Also many of them may not be so inter-

ested in his story as he is and so give it less close attention than he expects. Part of them habitually "skip" through a story and demand a plain and shining path. Certainly no one mind is exactly like another and all readers will not respond as does the author to any given set of stimuli if even a tiny loophole is left open. A rule given playwrights is that if it is essential to impress a basic point on the audience, the point must be made at least three times in the first scene. So extreme a rule is not needed for fiction, but the necessity of clearness, even on minor points, is no less pressing.

It is a natural and common mistake to overestimate the average reader's interest and attention and his ability and willingness to solve puzzles when he sits down to read a story. A writer usually forgets that to the reader his is merely one story out of dozens or hundreds recently read, out of thousands and ten thousands total. The writer's friendships have a personal interest in him and a very special interest in his story that carry them smilingly over many obstacles; to the average reader the writer probably means nothing whatsoever personally—quite pos-



sibly his name at the head of the story was not even read—and the story is merely one of very many. Any special attention to it must be won by the writer's skill and careful work.

Talbot Mundy, knowing in advance the general lines of this book, has furnished me from his voluminous reading with various quotations bearing on points covered, among them this from Quintillian:

“Care should be taken, not that the reader may understand if he will, but that he must understand, whether he will or not.”

And from Whitman:

“Nothing can make up for the lack of definiteness.”

*Ambiguous Words and Sentences.*—Any good text-book on English covers the subject and most writers would profit by the study thereof. If when they try a short story out on their friends they would ask for practical detailed criticism on such points as this, they would get laboratory results far more valuable than the proverbially undependable criticism of friends on the story as a whole.

*Proper Names.*—Be careful to give your characters names no two of which are similar.

The reader meets them for the first time and has the task of identifying each name with the proper character whenever it occurs. Why confuse him with two characters named "Lowe" and "Rowe," "Towne" and "Browne," "Morgan" and "Mordan," or even "Hadley" and "Hatfield"? Yet many and many a manuscript contains this needless stumbling-block for readers.

The same mistake is made in names of places, ships, and so on.

Another maddening and very common practise among writers is to use sometimes a character's last name, sometimes his first. Even a short story with only two or three characters can be made a needless omelette of confusion, for this bad habit is extended to include titles and nick-names or familiar forms of the full names. Consider "Doctor James Stanley," "Edward D. Gage" and "Captain John S. Tompkins." "Gage" is a lawyer and often called "Judge" by his intimates. "Tompkins'" lack of height earns him the usual "Shorty." The author uses some of each, possibly for the sake of "variety," and the three characters become, to the reader, an army and hopelessly confused—

“Stanley,” “Ed,” “Cap,” “Gage,” “Shorty,” “Jim,” “Judge,” “John,” “Doc,” “Tompkins,” “James,” “Johnnie,” “Edward.” Such a confusion is alone enough to ruin the blissfully unconscious writer’s story. For the simple reason that readers can only half know what is going on. Yet in practise it is a very common mistake.

*Technical and Foreign Words; Classical, Historical and Fictional References and Allusions.*—The confusion arises when a reader happens not to understand the word, even from the context, or to be unfamiliar with the reference. Writers seem to take it for granted that all readers will grasp the meaning without effort or delay. Or mystify deliberately to air their culture. The warning seems silly when set down on paper but is warranted by the number of offenses in actual practise.

*Naming Characters Early.*—Sometimes an effect of reality is gained by not at once naming characters in a story, giving the reader as it were, the effect of looking down upon a new world whose figures are no more known to him than they would be at first sight in a real scene. Generally, however, a reader is likely

to resent being left to follow, for even a few pages, the fortunes of a nameless person. Include particularly the narrator in a first-person story.

*Dialogue.*—Over and over again an editor is compelled to go back over a passage of dialogue in manuscript and “count out” with finger or pencil until he finds a line that is definitely connected with a particular speaker. The characters are not sufficiently individualized to be recognized from their lines, context fails to identify, the lines are not labeled with the speakers’ names and the least flicker of attention leaves one lost at the end of a dozen or even half a dozen speeches. Sometimes the author himself gets lost and mixes or omits. An ordinary reader doesn’t have to “count out” as does the editor—he is more likely to snort and pass on, with part of the story lost to him and its net register on him badly damaged. If he doesn’t snort and pass on he stops to puzzle it out. *Why* injure a story by so crude an omission?

*Too Many Characters.*—The heading is self-explanatory. All the characters in any story are utter strangers to the reader until he becomes familiar with them; he can keep clear

in his mind only a limited number of new acquaintances all made in the course of a few minutes; the kind of writer who uses many characters is usually the kind who is unable to individualize them with any vividness. A novel or novelette gives greater scope, but in a short story it may almost be given as a general rule that the fewer the characters, the stronger the story, not counting characters used in blocks, such as mobs, armies, spectators. Structure and proportion, as well as clearness, are of course involved.

*Dialect and Slang.*—Neither is familiar in all places or to all classes, and on the point of clearness both are to be condemned. Their advantages will be considered later.

The stupidest blunder in handling dialect is to misspell a word without really changing its pronunciation, thus confusing the reader's eye yet gaining only the appearance of dialect—and the reader's irritation.

*Contradictions and Inconsistencies.*—Their variety is infinite and their occurrence in submitted manuscripts frequent beyond the belief of those who read only the corrected printed page. A woman changes the color of her eyes; with a conversation that could oc-

cupy only one minute there is coincident action that couldn't possibly be compressed into five, or, *very* commonly, a bland lapse of even more time without any action; a six-shooter emits seven shots without reloading; of a party of fourteen, five turn back and ten remain; a character uses a word that would never be used by such a person in real life, or acts, without explanation, entirely at variance with his nature as the author has pictured it; the hero acts on information he has not yet received; a man's name changes during the story; a woman opens a door already open; a character goes somewhere else without leaving or becomes present without arriving. When you encounter such a break in a printed story doesn't it jar you out of the illusion, lessen your respect for the author, and therefore permanently damage his story's hold on you?

There can be no general rule for correction. When not the result of sheer carelessness and indifference, such errors are due to the author's failure to visualize, to live his scenes himself. This failure in some cases is due to real inability or comparative inability, but in very many cases to attention so obsessed and

ridden by principles of plot, rules for character drawing, regulations for niceties of style, application of technique in general and requirements of various magazines that there's no brain-force left for making the story world a really convincing and natural one in its all important details.

*Holding Reader to Correct Plot Line.*—In other words, proportion and emphasis. Briefly stated, what is meant here is clearness of path for the reader through the incidents of the story, so that his mind will follow or leap ahead only in the exact direction the author wishes for the fullest effectiveness of his story. This will be taken up in detail later.

*Simplicity.*—The following from Schopenhauer (thanks to Mr. Mundy) gives us the heart of the matter:

“Nothing is easier than to write so that no one can understand; just as, contrarily, nothing is more difficult than to express deep things in such a way that every one must necessarily grasp them.”

Yet to most of those sending manuscripts to magazines simplicity, particularly simplicity in words and style, is very pointedly something to be avoided whatever else is

done or left undone. The twin cause of this appalling idea, this curse stupidly laid upon American fiction, is the firmly rooted belief that literature must be an expression that is, first, unnatural, second, learned, recondite, even sophomoric. In its lowest and very common form it is no more than the crude idea that editors must be very scholarly persons and that therefore they would scorn any manuscript that didn't have a lot of "big words" in it. The simple language of Shakespeare, Homer, Virgil, the Bible and other really enduring classics loom before their eyes, but no, they follow the jack-o'-lantern of "big words." They have this excuse—much of the fiction published in magazines and books is fairly rotten with "big words," a reflection on editors and reading public as well as writers.

The hard practical argument against "dictionary words" is that most people find them difficult to understand or at least lack the definite, vivid, full connotation for them that they have for the simpler and more common words of our very rich language. Such words reduce the size of an author's fully appreciative audience. Another point is that the



writer who doesn't know any better than to make a business of using them is very often himself lacking in an understanding of their finer shades of meaning. A third point is that, unless such words are part of his own every-day vocabulary he is being unnatural in using them and thereby ruins his chances of attaining real style or producing real literature. Also he gives through them to his story an unnatural, artificial quality, an air of being forced. In the eyes of all those with a real understanding of real literature he makes of himself a plain darned fool.

But can there be no great literature without simplicity? None that couldn't be greater with it. A straight line is the shortest distance between two points; any deviation from it is lost motion, unnecessary; the best literature contains no lost motion and nothing that is unnecessary. But is not a "big word" sometimes the straight line? Yes, but for one case of this kind there are twenty when it is not. Sometimes the author uses it for a simpler phrasing not sufficiently mastered to come to mind at need; sometimes it is necessary only because he has committed himself by some roundabout phrasing demanding it

for completion; sometimes he commits himself to it by following the inferior method of telling the reader what is inside a character instead of making it plain through what the character says and does and what other characters say and do to him.

The final test for the use of "big words" is the nature of the material or ideas handled. In some cases they are necessary to a degree, sometimes to a great degree. But in practise the nature of the material is generally not correctly assayed, or is mishandled, or the need imagined. The ignorant use them through ignorance; for those with a good knowledge of words it is generally *easier* to use the "big word," the Latin derivative instead of the simpler Anglo-Saxon.

Is it not therefore more natural and so better for this last class to use the "big word"? That depends on why it is natural—or on whether it is natural or merely habitual. A writer may have come into the use of them, not by natural development but through deliberate effort, a stunt for the sake of seeming learned or being impressive, so that their use, while easy to him, is merely the result of his having made of himself a kind of abnormality—an artificial result of artificial talking

and method of thought. On the other hand is the far rarer case of him whose mind naturally expresses itself through polysyllables, generally because of an education from books instead of people. I know one writer who spoke to no one for two years except for the barest necessities because when he used what to him was perfectly natural language the people he met thought he was "stuck up" or showing off.

I do not know why Henry James wrote as he did, but contrast the two following cases:

I once shared an apartment with an ardent admirer of James and as I did not share his admiration we argued frequently. James came to New York while my friend was preparing a bibliography of his idol's works. There was some question as to several early articles or stories that had magazine but not book publication and my friend wrote for the simple information necessary. It could have been given amply and courteously in two or three sentences. The reply was appalling in its totally unnecessary complexity, length and creation of detail, so much so that my friend woke me up to show it to me and joined in my unholy glee. It was, surely, a natural expression, but why was it natural?

And certainly it was not adapted to the nature of the material or idea.

Now read the first one hundred and fifty words of *A Coward* by De Maupassant, even in translation, then write down the things you know about the character described in those few very simple words and you will be amazed at the length of the list.

Consider that De Maupassant and his master Flaubert stand preeminently for unrelenting search for "the one word" and that both of them are characterized by extreme simplicity of presentation. And is any character of Henry James' so much more intricately drawn than "Madame Bovary"?

Among more modern writers take Joseph Conrad. I am a Conrad "fan," but consider him, comparatively speaking, a poor workman though a great artist. Here we have simplicity of words but not of expression in a general sense. I do not by any means fully understand most of his stories and I find that others are about equally at sea if they are honest or are cross-examined. In most of the qualities that make a great fictionist he stands in the front rank, but he is lacking in *corresponding* ability to simplify and clarify his thought, to make the proper abstraction

and selection of thought expressions. His content and gifts are so rich that even only a part of them registered on readers is sufficient to rate him a master, but the fact remains that he conveys only a part of what he has to say. Instead of a direct, clear-cut, simple path to his goal he gives the reader a maze of paths that is not lacking in blind alleys.

Whatever be the generally accepted academic philosophy of simple versus complex expression, it can not outface the fact that the minority of readers can not so fully understand or appreciate complexity and that with them the effectiveness of a story is thereby crippled. Certainly in practise there is crying need for the mastery that can say all yet say it simply. If, instead of straining for complexity, beginners would aim at simplicity, especially of words, they would not only come closer to writing both good magazine stories and good literature, but would find themselves able to "handle" greater and greater complexity of thought and with a precision and effectiveness that can not be equaled by the other method.

Remember that the simple, every-day words are in almost all cases the *stronger* ones.

*Repetition.*—Before leaving the subject of clearness as a whole (it will come up again in connection with other subjects), a word might be ventured on repetition. The present horror of it is a badly exaggerated reaction. To repeat without due cause an unusual word or phrase in a short story, or a usual one too close to its first use, is a distraction and therefore harmful to the illusion, but sometimes due cause is ignored. A story, all so clear to its author, presents hundred of facts with which the reader must familiarize himself. The easier you make this for him and the more you insure his getting all the points necessary to a full appreciation of your story, the more fully will your story register on him. To present a vital point once so vividly that it is almost sure to register is best of all and correspondingly difficult to do, but keep your eyes open for cases where repetition, probably not in exactly the same words, will accomplish the same purpose nearly as well and perhaps more surely.

Aside from clearness, in skilful hands repetition can become a most subtle and powerful instrument for dramatic and poetic effects of high literary quality.

## CHAPTER VII

### OVERSTRAIN

A READER has just so much of attention, interest and appreciation to give to any story and, to hold him in the illusion, it is of the highest importance not to wear him out before you are through with him and not to use him up on minor points or on matters that should put upon him no strain whatever.

*Brevity.*—Most of all, don't talk too much or too long. A story is never so dead as when buried in words. Most of the stories submitted can be cut to advantage, often very heavily cut. The reader gets worn out waiting for something to happen—is bored by being told in a hundred words what he could have grasped in twenty.

Do not feel that you must give the entire history of the hero's life in a short story; only a certain few incidents and facts have direct bearing and the remainder must be mercilessly cut out. Nor all the scenes and

action of any story. Make it your object to have as much as possible happen off-stage; what forces itself to the footlights will probably belong there.

*Unclearnesses and Distractions.*—Any unclearness or ambiguity or any distraction is of course a profitless strain upon the reader. Don't compel a reader to *reason* out things that should be clear at a glance. Even the intentional unclearness of subtlety, though by no means a fault, must also be weighed as to disadvantage in strain.

All the points covered in Chapter VI apply in this one.

*Sentence Length.*—Vary it. If you can, vary it in accordance with variation in emotions of material, in desired effects on reader, but vary it in any case. The very monotony of a long succession of either long or short sentences is wearing.

Don't drag a reader through a sentence so long that in following it he tires out before he can draw mental breath.

*Hold Reader to Correct Plot Line.*—From first word to last, don't wear him out by letting him cover useless distance over false trails.



*Classical and Other References.*—In addition to their dangers of distraction and unclearness they force a reader, if they reach him, to picture or consider characters, events and scenes in addition to those of the story. They are of course justified in comparatively rare instances.

*Dialect, Archaic Speech, Slang, Foreign, Unusual and Technical Words.*—All these offer obstacles to at least part of your audience. To a probable minority dialect is a delight, it is of course necessary to faithful realism, and it undoubtedly gives color. Yet many will not read a dialect story, their chief reason being the labor necessary to understand it. There are, too, those who consciously or unconsciously object to anything foreign, meaning by foreign anything different from their own. It is, for the author, a question of weighing advantages against disadvantages. Archaic speech, as far as strain is concerned, is merely dialect. One writer makes the rule of using the speech of the time in which his story is laid for all periods following and including that of Elizabeth, using modern English for all earlier periods, his argument being that her reign approx-

imately draws the line between speech that is now intelligible with little or no effort and speech that is not. Archaic forms of foreign tongues must be rendered to us in English, so fall under the same rule.

Slang, too, is to be weighed as to advantages and disadvantages. It is perhaps more difficult than in the cases of dialect and archaic speech to compute the proportion of readers to whom it will be sufficiently intelligible. On the other hand, it is generally in itself humorous and therefore of particular value when a humorous effect is desired; gives color; aids in characterization.

The danger of foreign, unusual and technical words is much the same on the score of strain as on the score of distraction and unclearness.

*Relief Scenes.*—At some point a reader's response to a demand on his emotions ceases and he grows callous to the appeal, but writers often forget this fact and continue to demand long after he has lost his ability to respond. Perfection is to bring him to your climax at the full flood of response, but to do so requires careful handling. A steady, gentle increase of demand is best if you can be

absolutely sure of results, but a most useful safeguard is the use of relief scenes. If you've keyed him up to a dangerously high pitch, give him a rest-scene before you add a further call upon his emotions—shift the scene or time and let him look a moment at a quiet landscape or gentle action. Make the change a decided one and you not only rest him but profit by the sharp dramatic contrast between the relief scene and those following and preceding it.\*

*Frames or Brackets.*—That is, a story within a story—a story one of whose characters tells the main story. Its advantage is a gain in semblance of reality—if it is handled with sufficient skill. It very seldom is. Its disadvantage is an overstrain, in demanding of the reader that he form two illusions instead of one, and a consequent dividing and weakening of attention. Having accomplished the task of getting clear in his mind one setting and one set of characters, he is forced to take up a new set of characters and probably a new setting, a double strain within the compass of a single story. If, as is

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\*Read De Quincey's *On the Knocking at the Gate in "Macbeth."*

often the case, a character in the frame (or several characters) persists in interrupting the course of the inner, the real story, conflict or confusion of illusion is compounded.

Most writers could profit by not attempting the doubly difficult task of a bracketed or framed story. Unless exceptional skill is brought to bear, the frame-story is almost sure either to be too slight and unconvincing or to be made more or less convincing by being developed at such length that it is too serious an encroachment upon space needed for the real story. Yet it is a favorite attempt with those least able to handle it.

*Mystery Stories.*—These must be considered as a class by themselves, for their deliberate intent is to make the reader strain at solving a puzzle or at following its intricate presentation and solution, and he turns to them at least partly for the mental stimulus involved. Yet overstrain is entirely possible. In fact, this type, by reason of its inherent intricacy and effort for the reader, demands particularly that he be not compelled to strain over points that are non-essential to the mystery proper. Unskilled or unfair writers sometimes intentionally add con-

fusions that are in no way necessary, and many a mystery story lessens its hold on readers by unintended unclearnesses or suggestions that mislead in unnecessary directions and to no purpose. A reader may like to solve puzzles, but he most emphatically has the right to be at all times clear as to just what the puzzle is.

*Plot.*—Unnecessary intricacy, of course, should be avoided in any type of story; the difficulty in a given case is to draw the line between necessary and unnecessary. But for any writer who has not made very decided progress toward mastering his art a fairly safe rule is to simplify his plot as much as possible. Perhaps that plot might be made more effective if developed in greater intricacy by skilled hands, but his hands are probably not sufficiently skilful and the net result of his attempt is likely to be a reader worn out by too many loosely knit threads of plot. As he grows in skill he will find that more and more intricate plots become—for him—simple plots and therefore to be undertaken with confidence.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONVINCINGNESS

AMONG writers of some experience the rejection of a manuscript for the quite common reason that it is "not convincing" is often considered merely the editor's slipshod, evasive or ignorant excuse given in place of some mysterious real reason or through lack of any definite one. Sometimes it is, but, when honestly and intelligently given, it is the best possible reason for rejection. "Unconvincingness" means definitely and directly that a story fails to impose its illusion—that it is merely words for the reader to look at, not a world for him to live in. It is the death-knell to the illusion.

An editor's failure to give the reasons why it is "not convincing" may be due to his not having analyzed beyond the general effect, but it may be simply because unconvincingness is not easy to reduce to black and white and at best involves far more detail than his

time permits him to handle. It is as various and elusive as human nature itself, but the more common causes can be fairly well indicated.

*Improbabilities and Impossibilities.*—Contradictions and inconsistencies have already been considered in Chapter VI and are to be included under this head. Improbability and impossibility are of course relative terms; a wishing-ring, while an utter impossibility in reality, is not even an improbability in a story of fairies; if the reader accepts the major illusion of fairy-land there will be no difficulty to his accepting the minor illusion of a wishing-ring. But in a story of anything approaching real life absolute conformity to the laws and facts of real life is relentlessly exacted, and in stories dependent upon the acceptance of some fundamental premise, like the reality of fairy-land or the possibility of being transferred into the year 2022, there must be equally relentless conformity to the condition of the premise.

I venture that not twenty per cent. of *accepted* manuscripts are entirely free from slips of this kind when submitted. Acceptance has been in spite of them, each of them les-

sened the chances of acceptance, and sufficient increase in their number would have meant rejection by any good magazine. There is, of course, the type of story that depends upon sheer quantity and tenseness of action to carry the reader along, despite all inconsistencies and improbabilities — the “dime novel” type, but all the strain of a bridge should not be upon a single girder.

*Improbabilities of Plot.*—Too infinite in variety for any attempt at classification. The test in each case must reduce first to, “Could it happen under the conditions?” And the writer—with help from his friends if they can be induced to help in this more practical fashion—must be the judge. Then he must narrow his question to, “Is it so likely to happen that the reader will accept it *without hesitation?*” Here is the real test and most writers fail to meet it largely because they have not, under the present system of teaching fiction, been trained to measure a story strictly through the reader’s eyes. Many a time every editor has been “caught” by an author who wrote back gleefully or vindictively “but it actually happened in real life!” Doubtless, but that doesn’t mean anything.



It may have happened a thousand times in real life, but if readers can not believe it when they find it in a story it is none the less an improbability in that story, a blow to convincingness, a check to the reader, an injury to the illusion.

I have struggled so often, and so often vainly, to make writers realize this distinction that I come to it now girded for the fray. Can't they see that a fact can not be a fact to a reader if he refuses to consider it a fact? Are they so hopelessly egotistic in their outlook on life that, because an improbable or unusual thing has occurred in their personal experience, it has thereby demonstrated its possibility to every one else? Are they so sickeningly conceited as to be sure that their presentation of the fact is as convincing to others as was the fact itself to them? Are they so imbecile as not to see that "proving" it to an editor *after* the reading of the story does not in any way prove it to the next or any reader *while* he is reading it? That, if it were published, they would never have the chance to prove it afterward in the case of readers as they had had in the case of the editor? That readers, ninety-nine times out

of a hundred, would not even bother to challenge the author on the point but would merely class him as "punk" and his story as "bunk" and go on to the next in the thousands of stories they read?

Ah, no, it "really happened" somewhere! That ought to be enough for anybody, even if he doesn't know it happened and is convinced that it couldn't and knows mighty well that it is contrary to his own experience!

A leprechawn or a magic carpet can be made entirely convincing as part of the story's illusion by sufficient skill and in the proper setting, while the wonderful drive you and a half-dozen other witnesses saw John R. Smith make, on your club links a week ago Wednesday can, if put into a story, seem nothing whatever but a crude lie. Verily, truth is stranger than fiction—particularly good fiction. Good fiction makes a business of being a little less strange than truth sometimes is, so that it can be believed.

As a matter of fact, a "really happened" incident is likely to need twice the amount of "framing up" that an imaginary but more usual one would require.

The true addict to this stupid and stubborn

point of view scorns the simple device, used by his betters, of presenting the unusual *as* an unusual thing. No, it must be accepted as normal; it happened, you've got to believe it. It doesn't occur to him that it was unusual to him, that he seized upon it as material for that very reason, that it would be equally unusual to the characters in his story and that, really to duplicate or simulate life, he must make his characters register the same surprise and interest that he himself felt as a result of its unusualness. You can make a reader accept something as a remarkable occurrence which he would utterly reject as a normal happening.

For example, take the common case of the very feminine heroine who goes through the author's best hell of horror, desperation, bodily strain and general nerve-shock and, when rescued at its very climax, at once blandly regains almost entire poise and enunciates a very charming love-passage or goes cheerfully and competently about her other business. Most of us know that it is characteristic of the female sex to rise to an emergency strain and collapse or violently react the instant the demand is removed if not

before. Consequently said heroine fails to convince. The author's logical correction is to make this heroine conform to general experience, but, if he simply can not or will not change this part of his plot, why not give what convincingness he may by making her show at least some effects of the strain, or making clear that reaction had not yet come, or at least some such crude but comparatively desirable device as "strangely enough"?

*Improbabilities of Character.*—Like human nature, too various for specific classification. Most writers are capable of at least some understanding of human nature and a weakness along these lines can be partly corrected by a combination of earnest study and sincere care. Failure to draw character convincingly is an absolute limit to success except in the lowest grades of fiction and in such uncommon types of story as are in no way dependent for interest upon fidelity to human nature.

The wire-nerved heroine cited above is an example. Any expression, thought, emotion or act assigned to a character to whom, as drawn, it would not be natural helps destroy

the reality of that character—the word “grievously” or “interrelation” in the mouth of an ignorant, illiterate character; a thought of the Virgin Mary in the mind of a Protestant during a crisis; a feeling of pity, not specified as unusual, in a pitiless person; fumbling in an emergency by a man drawn as cool, clear-headed and ready.

*Lack of Characterization.*—Unless a character is given at least a semblance of individualization he will be unlike any human in real life or else will be like some human viewed from a distant mountain-top or airship, in either case unconvincing as a “close up.” Yet in the vast majority of submitted manuscripts characters are proper names and nothing more. This will be taken up in the chapter on “Characterization.”

*Clanking Plots.*—“The framework shows through,” “you can hear the machinery go round,” “artificial”—such plots are like the doggerel whose author does violence to both content and expression in order to get at the ends of lines words that approximate a rhyme. Lack of plot is almost a synonym. Instead of building a plot that is the natural result of character, conditions or conflicting

forces, the author draws at will upon the universe at large for whatever elements will lend what he considers strength and effectiveness. Since the law of cause and effect holds in real life, such a plot is unconvincing. In reading even published stories haven't you often found something said or done that was obviously put into the story, not for its intrinsic or relative value, but solely for the plot-purpose of making other things connect and keep moving? And what is the effect upon your belief in the story, upon your illusion?

*Hack Plots.*—I've forgotten who first said that there are only seven—or is it nine or five?—plots in the world, but, whoever he was, he's done a good deal of damage. With that hopeless dictum looming before their eyes it is not to be wondered at that many writers strive half-heartedly or not at all for originality of plot. Add this to the majority's lack of invention, our ingrained habit of copying and a tendency to take rather than make and you can see why an editor can reject at a glance a large proportion of submitted stories. Like any other reader, he has very thoroughly learned some scores of

plots or plot variations and doesn't need to read them any more. Usually the author who turns in a hack plot is the author who has little to offer except plot. And quite often he answers a rejection for hack plot by quoting "there are only five plots in the world anyway." If that is so, five is enough to enable better writers to write better stories.

The patent objection to hack plots is that they have outworn, with all but the newest and most elemental readers, the power to hold in illusion, therefore demanding an extra amount of excellence in other factors. There is also the objection that this very repetition of a formula identified with fiction, particularly poor fiction, gives them at once the flavor of fiction instead of real life, and successful illusion is thus made extremely difficult.

As a lonely little plea in behalf of wearied editors, couldn't you arrange, when you wish to shoot or stab a character without removing him entirely, to wound him somewhere else than in the shoulder? The bullet that proved merely to have glanced off the skull is also rather overworked. And must you turn for help to overheard conversations?

*Coincidence.*—Coincidence is such a favorite device for attaining a hack pot, a clanking plot and improbability in general that it calls for a separate and emphatic warning. A reader's credence for coincidences is strictly limited, especially if they are presented as matters of course.

*Hack Style.*—Objectionable for the same reason as hack plot. The inevitable connotation of hack words and phrases is of the "writing game," of the printed page, of stories sold for money, not of real life—too "magaziney" to be successful in holding illusions in which magazines can have practically no place. Each hack phrase, moreover, is a lost opportunity for a right phrase that would have added to effectiveness. Also, readers are just plain tired of them.

*Frames or Brackets and First-Person Narratives.*—Guard against letting the frame-story character who tells the real story talk so long, fluently and perfectly that readers will note the impossibility of his performing such a feat in real life. First-person narratives, not in a frame, generally avoid this impossibility by having the narrative written instead of spoken; otherwise they run the



same danger. Most of all, don't let the narrator abandon his own speech for that of the author himself. He generally does.

*Dialect, Slang, Foreign Words.*—All these, rightly used, tend toward convincingness of color and character, but their effectiveness is often measured by suggestion rather than quantity. Broad Scotch dialect at full strength will give a very Scotch atmosphere, for example, but many readers will refuse to enter that atmosphere or will become lost in it if they do enter. Often idiom is a more effective device than dialect.

*Ignorance of Material: Mistakes.*—There is, heaven knows, just ground for the belief that writers are given to writing of things with which they are not sufficiently familiar. Instead of using the material they know best, as a class they are too prone to select the material they'd like to know about but don't. Also to feign a scholarliness they don't possess or to attempt a style they have not mastered.

Lack or loss of faith in the author is as great a catastrophe as lack or loss of belief in the story. Irritation against him is still more fatal. If you have any doubt, an edi-

tor's mail would dispel it. Nothing brings so many or such bitter protests from readers as a mistake in handling local color. Mark that well, you who "take a chance" because you think you can—and often do—"get away with it." Not only do you underestimate the irritation, sometimes amounting to a virulence that remembers you and follows you with hostility through your other stories, but your ignorance of setting, local color, material blinds you to the infinite possibility for unconscious mistakes that are instantly detected by those who know and make you ridiculous in their eyes.

Your dialect, slang and foreign quotations gain you no color if you make mistakes in them. Classical, historical and fictional references, or "big words" in English, if incorrectly used, give you no reputation for scholarship. Having your villain run lightly away with more dollars in gold or dust than he could lift from the ground or using an "automatic revolver" does not impress readers with your knowledge of what you write about. Giving Brazilians Spanish as their native tongue produces very unlocal color. A negro strain in a pure-blooded Creole shows no knowledge of types.

Add to these the mistakes considered in the chapter on "Distractions," add all the other mistakes of which the uninformed human brain is capable, and then take up your heavy burden of becoming thoroughly familiar with the material you use in stories. A month or two in a locality will not give to any save a Kipling sufficient familiarity for safety. Most writers think it will. And, whatever you do, don't fool with fire-arms or with anything pertaining to ships until you have become a real authority! I speak from bitter experience; editor, as well as writer, becomes the target for almost venomous ire. And no detail is too tiny for detection and wrath. The picture of a grizzly bear on a magazine cover brought a vicious indictment because, while a grizzly has six toes, not five, he does not show the sixth toe especially when in the position depicted.

The convincingness of a story as a whole, then, is dependent upon many detailed factors and there is some excuse for the editor who does not give the analyzed reasons for his verdict of "unconvincing."

Such a weakness is due, on one hand, to

ignorance, deliberate indifference or almost criminal carelessness or, on the other hand, to failure to visualize clearly from the point of view of the reader. The most practical remedy, for both classes of causes, is, aside from the writer's own efforts, a fundamental change in teaching methods, putting far more emphasis upon training writers to habitual and very anxious consideration of the reader's actual reactions to every least stimulus in a story.

## CHAPTER IX

### HOLDING THE READER

WHILE most points that bear here fall more directly under other headings, some definitely belong in this chapter. And, though I know of no recipe for being interesting, there are certain things that may be of help to that effort.

*Being Dramatic.*—All stories, to be interesting, I think, must be dramatic, in the broader sense of the word, both in style and in selection and recombination of material. The very demand for unity and structure is a demand for the dramatic, the dramatic quality being largely a matter of position and contrast, and a baldly unemotional or matter-of-fact style can be strongly dramatic through its contrast with the emotional material handled. However, lest I be confounded by the philosophers, I'll discard "Being Dramatic" and attempt instead, suggestions

as to "being interesting," not with any idea of covering the subjects completely but rather, (as in much of this book), calling attention to points on which writers prove themselves particularly weak in actual practise and which seem to call for more attention in teaching methods.

*Suspense.*—The chief warning needed is not to spoil it after you've secured it. Over and over again a writer ruins his reader's suspense by betraying the plot in advance and making a surprise impossible. Sometimes it is inadvertent, but often it is deliberately done by at least a general statement or hint of outcome prefaced with some such phrase as "little did I know then that," "could he have known," "in the light of what followed there was no need for my next step," etc., or even more baldly betraying, say, the outcome of an entire book whose interest is at least partly based on whether hero wins heroine, by such as "Now, with Nita and our children sitting by me as I write, my doubts seem foolish ones."

To me one of the most amazing faults in the entire repertoire is the flat betrayal of plot by the chapter headings. Why do it? Is

it merely a slip due to concentration on the really nerve-racking task of choosing an interesting and pertinent title for the chapter? Or is the habit of not measuring by the reader's reactions so strong that in so prominent and spectacular a place a writer does not even note that he has advertised in advance to readers the very thing he should be trying to keep as a surprise?

*Surprises.*—Be sure they are legitimate. It is one thing to shape a story so that the reader will expect other than what is to happen, but quite another for you to tell him definitely that he is to expect the other. Yet some writers do this.

*Mystery.*—Naturally, play upon human curiosity and the human hunting-instinct whenever opportunity offers, but, as in the case of surprises, be sure your mystery structure and detail play fair with the reader. Here, too, you may give him false scents to follow, for he accepts them as part of the game, but, to change the figure, be sure that the ladder by which the goal is finally reached has no rungs missing. And in heaven's name don't fog your story with the needless mysteries of careless unclearness and

confusion when nothing but irritation is to be gained by it.

*Overstrain.*—Already covered. But some of its points demand extra attention for the sake of dramatic effect.

*Light and Shade.*—Their proper use is essential to mastery of dramatic effect. Just as a square of black on a white sheet stands out far blacker and stronger than on a black one, just so does a strong scene stand out stronger if preceded and perhaps followed by a quiet scene than if merely one in a succession of strong scenes. Such a succession, properly handled for cumulative effect and steady rise to a climax, may as a whole be stronger than an alternation of strong and quiet, but such a succession is itself a unit and as such subject to the general law. There is always the danger of overstrain in its use.

The above applies, of course, to the elements within a scene, in the make-up of a character, or in anything else. For example, the traits of a character all good or all bad are not so vivid as those of a character partly good and partly bad—nor is the character so natural.

The element of unexpectedness in the sense



of particularly sudden surprise is extremely effective by reason of the sharp contrast involved.

*Repression.*—Often more effective than expression of emotion, for the fundamental reason, particularly in the case of emotion felt by a character, that, however strong the emotion, repression means the addition of something sufficiently stronger to master it and of a struggle for the mastery, even though neither is definitely described in the story. There is contrast between emotion and will, between the expression to be expected and the absence of it, perhaps between one character's repression and another's lack of it. In the case of repression by the author in the general handling of a scene an advantage lies in his giving to each reader opportunity to fill out the emotion in whatever way is most satisfying and natural to each from the mere skilful stimulus furnished by the author. If this advantage seems slight, consider the drawings for an illustrated story. In how many cases does the artist's conception of characters, scene and expression coincide with that of a reader? Supposing it were possible for the artist to furnish only such

suggestions as would enable each reader to fill out a picture in accordance with his own conception, would not each reader find it more satisfying? Incidentally, would it be a higher form of art?

Also there is enough of the Anglo-Saxon in our national character to implant in perhaps most of us an impulse to run away from too free expression of emotion. A reader's impulse to run away from a story does not add to its effectiveness.

Certainly repression of emotion in the sense of condensing the number of words used in expression could be practised to great advantage by the majority of writers.

But, first, last and always, remember that repressing emotion should seldom mean annihilating. Perhaps the correct idea is shown by contrasting a spiral spring compressed to its least space and greatest potential force with the same spring spent from being sprung, or with the absence of a spring.

*Omitting Scenes.*—A story is at bottom a selection of certain bits of material from an almost infinite number of bits or, put the other way, the rejection of all material except the salient bits. Dramatic effect is often in-

creased by keying the process of selection and abstraction to a more rigid scale, even rejecting comparatively salient bits. For example, a whole scene, though fitting into the story's development, may lend greater effectiveness to the whole by being inferred instead of enacted on stage.

*Condensation.*—It is safe to say that many writers could make most of their stories not only more dramatic but more effective in general by greater condensation. Those of you, especially, who aim for popularity rather than the judgment of posterity should remember that we live in an age of motion-pictures, that one of their chief characteristics is speed, and that our youth are growing up with that speed more or less fixed in their minds as a standard for all narrative or expository art. What will they, consequently, demand of fiction? Are they becoming impatient of what we have considered the normal speed of fiction narrative? Just as they, and perhaps we older ones, are already inclined to impatience over Cooper, Scott and Dickens, perhaps because steam and electricity have keyed us to a faster gait. Do you not find boys who will throb over a movie of *The*

*Last of the Mohicans* or *The Three Musketeers*, but who can not be induced to wade through these stories in book form as you and I so gladly waded? Is it merely that youth welcomes the quicker path and that these same youths will in more mature years turn to the more leisurely presentation? Even so, a slower speed may be losing them as audience while they are ripening sufficiently to prefer it.

On the other hand, do motion-pictures overfeed us with speed so that we turn with relief to the more leisurely methods of fiction?

I venture no final conclusion, but certainly the narrative art as a whole moves faster than it did twenty or even ten years ago. Here is opportunity for some college classes in fiction or psychology to contribute exceptionally valuable data through laboratory or field experiments covering at least a part of the ground.

Meanwhile there is no doubt that, by either old or new standard, most writers would profit by more condensation. There is no surer way of boring a reader than by talking too much, and even honey or strong drink can

be diluted until it has neither strength nor flavor. And remember, class-rooms, in judging this point from published stories, that the editor has frequently done the writer's condensing for him because of the story's need or the limitations of space.

*Short vs. Long Words and Sentences.*—Remember that in tense moments or under extreme emotion most men resort to short, simple, Anglo-Saxon words and brief sentences. Remember that therefore short words and sentences are likely to be in themselves more tense and dramatic and, though not so generally, more emotional.

Remember, too, the need of avoiding monotony from any word- or sentence-length.

*Handling, Setting, Color and Character.*—Holding the reader is essentially a matter of not being dull and there is no sovereign cure for dullness, but the following device will go a long way toward avoiding it.

Instead of giving the reader setting and local color in discouragingly large pieces, weave them into the action. An old device, to be sure, but one much too little used. Instead of describing a vast plain, let a charac-

ter ride over it, speak of it or think of it, thus at the same time developing scenery, character and action for the reader. If you wish to picture the plain's vegetation, incorporate some of it as even a very minor plot-factor—have the rider pluck some of it, have his horse's progress impeded by it, hide another character behind it. There are a thousand ways of thus accomplishing more than one thing at once. But remember, too, that a reader must be given his general bearings as soon as he enters a story.

*Hack Work.*—Anything in your story, except material itself, that has been used until threadbare by countless writers before you is “hack stuff” and has small chance of holding your reader, for the perfectly simply reason that he's tired of it before he reads it. Whether a matter of plot or diction and no matter how good it was in the beginning, it is a handicap that only a master can turn into an asset. Avoid, however, the opposite extreme of being different to such an extent or so clumsily that your effort is obvious. I know of no recipe for avoiding “hack stuff”—no more than for avoiding lack of individuality and other little matters of that kind, but

surely a writer of even moderate discernment can detect and correct this fault in some degree by taking pains to note and avoid the elements that recur most frequently in poor or mediocre fiction. Unfortunately most writers begin by copying (unconscious copying, while more ethical, is harder to correct than is deliberate copying) and your natural copier is not likely to be overly intelligent in choice of models.

*Titles and Chapter Headings.*—This subject is too large for discussion here, since it involves the psychology of both fiction and advertising, but three rules can be given: (1) Aim at the very heart of the subject-matter for your general title idea; (2) don't let them betray too much in advance, but make them "lure"; (3) select chapter heads with almost as much care as titles, for they are of great psychological importance.

## CHAPTER X

### PLEASING THE READER

DIVIDE all readers into majority and minority. It is legitimate and profitable to aim at either. Now make your big decision, and it is a very big one. At which of these will you aim? If the majority, study and analyze their tastes and reactions. If the minority, study and analyze the majority first; then study the minority. Their tastes are not necessarily opposite, but they are necessarily different, also various; the minority are a unit only in being different from the majority. But you can reach them fairly well merely by giving them the opposite of what the majority like. Your problem is whether you can get a better slice of attention from the majority of readers in competition with the majority of writers or from the minority of readers in competition with a minority of writers.

*Majority vs. Minority.*—Your own peculiar



gifts and inclinations in writing should be the deciding factor, but you can make no intelligent decision until you really have some understanding of the two groups between which you must decide. If you write for money only, study them till you have your human-nature formulas at your finger-ends and almost automatically apply them to every idea, expression or bit of material that comes up for consideration. If you write for art only, study them just the same (you'll be getting the best material in the world), but instead of turning the results into formulas turn them into your understanding. If you write according to the method—commonly called inspiration and attributed to what we, sometimes hastily, term genius—of merely exploding yourself into the world at large without deigning to look at said world, continue to explode as usual, but when your creation is all created go over it with pencil, blue-pencil and waste-basket in the light of knowledge and understanding of whichever audience you prefer as target, and make very, very sure that what you inspired into your story is going to reach that audience just as you intended it should and is going to please

and interest them as much as you fondly imagined.

For, you see, you are almost certainly not a genius. A genius makes his own rules and they are better for his case than are any rules other people can make for him. If any genius is by strange chance reading this book I hope he will stop and read no other in place of it. He will almost surely do far better without. God knows the world is too full of rules for writing fiction and of people who allow the rules to ride them out of all ability to use the rules. The proper function of rules is that of mere guides and suggestions to be weighed, analyzed, and then either discarded or so thoroughly absorbed that their application during the act of creating is automatic and subconscious and their use as tests after creating is no more than the author's own spontaneously critical view of what he has written. Nothing in this book is intended to hang like a "Do it now" motto on the author's wall; its one intention is to give him a fresh point of view and the kind of foundation that will enable him to make his own rules out of his own understanding.

In this book we are concerned primarily

with the majority of readers and, unless otherwise specified, have in mind his likings and reactions.

*Choice of Material and Theme.*—The majority of readers would probably value their lives above any other selfish consideration—life in the sense of existence but also in the sense of health and vigor. Next, such things as love, success, wealth, happiness, uplift, knowledge, beauty and contest, not necessarily in the order named. These, or combinations of these, such as success in a contest for life or love or wealth, offer a safe beginning in selecting material or a theme for fiction. These are the fundamental things vital to human beings. The further you get from them, the more must you approach appeal to a minority. (The majority, of course, does not always consist of the same individuals, but merely of most individuals, and shifts in membership more or less with each shift of point at issue.)

*Happiness.*—Human beings would on the whole rather be happy than unhappy. Therefore happy themes and pleasant material are surest for pleasing the majority. Generally speaking, people read fiction for entertain-

ment and prefer feeling happier rather than unhappier when they lay down a story. Sympathy, morbidness and a desire to play with the fire of fear, horror and suffering give rise to contrary tastes in fiction, the drama and other forms of art, but the general, fundamental desire is for happiness.

What is happiness? I attempt no definition. One man knows probably as well as any other. All of us can watch other human beings and have a very fair idea of what makes most of them happy.

Generalizations on human nature are unsafe but, to take an extreme case, a story of cripples, deformities and disease, unless this material is very strongly counteracted with success, love, sympathy, etc., would please none but abnormal readers. Deformities and disease offend the inherent love of life, health and beauty. Again, the majority prefer non-tragic stories, preferring to think of life rather than death, of success rather than unsuccess.

Let me make it emphatically plain that I am attempting no such foolish thing as a catalogue of material for fiction. My one purpose is to lead the writer into doing what he so

often fails to do—*consider his material very carefully from the point of view of the probable reactions of human beings instead of choosing it according to God knows what silly rules for writing fiction or merely repeating the material and themes he has seen that other writers use.*

A few stray points may be of some service:

The beginners and the very young are as a class the writers most given to tragedy and morbidness. As they develop they generally change to more cheerful material.

The percentage of tragic and morbid stories would dwindle rapidly if it were not for the empty writer's desire to "do something strong" and his inability to get strength in any other way.

The horror story has its legitimate place, as has any story dealing with human emotions, which are the very heart-food of fiction and of unfailing interest to the human readers. Suffering, unsuccess, death, all the unpleasant things you please, are good fiction material. But, if I may make the distinction, they are good, not because they hurt, but because, like happier things, they appeal to the readers' human sympathy and understanding.

Since I shall not give it space anywhere else, the question of realism *versus* idealism may be dragged in here from the point of view of the readers' liking. When I first came to New York, in youthful throes over this and similar momentous questions, I had the good fortune of a letter to William Dean Howells and, trembling at this God-given opportunity, broached my chief problem. Mr. Howells was incapable of anything but gentleness, and the process of his gentleness in my case was so kindly that its words are no longer clear in my memory, but the gist of his reply is very clear indeed. He told me to go ride on a Fifth Avenue bus and write down whatever caught the attention of a young man fresh to New York. I pass on to others that very excellent advice. Go ride on a bus or sit still somewhere and write about whatever catches your attention. The question of whether the result is realism or idealism is one you can afford to forget, for the main point is that you should follow your own particular gift for seeing life. The only attention you need give the result is consideration of its appeal to people in general, changing or not changing the result according to the rela-

tive value you assign to popularity and art, remembering that the two need not be mutually exclusive goals and that either realism or idealism finds response in a sufficient number of readers.

*The Philosophy of Fiction.*—Doubtless there are a hundred explanations of the fundamental appeal of fiction to human beings. That given by George Henry Lewes seems particularly illuminating and practically helpful.

It is, in substance, as I recollect it:

*Fiction appeals to man because it enables him to attain vicariously, through the characters in the story world, the perfection and success he can not attain in real life, and to live for a while in a world of his own choosing instead of in the real world that has been thrust upon him.*

The first part of this definition does not seem to apply to realistic and analytical fiction, though the second part does, nor does any of the definition seem to take sufficient account of the reader's enjoyment of the exercise of his sympathies or the broadening of his understanding and knowledge or of his sheer joy in artistic excellence. This appar-

ent failure to cover the ground, however, is not so real as it seems. Joy over artistic excellence is essentially a critic's feeling, not a reader's—the joy of a technician, not of a recipient, of a cook, not of a diner. And if you will apply my distinction between fiction and the various things for which fiction is a mere vehicle, the contributions to understanding and knowledge are not a part of fiction itself and therefore need not be covered by the definition. The exercise of the reader's sympathies may also be accounted for by strict application of this distinction; or the "vicarious perfection and success" of the definition may be broadened to a comparison of the reader's own life with lives of the story people, better here, worse there, either stimulating variety and satisfaction or affording the vicarious improvement of condition.

But, whether or not you consider the definition all inclusive, there is in it a fundamental idea whose practical application would go far toward winning for most writers a far stronger and deeper hold on readers. Sophomoric critics and writers may be inclined to sweep it off the boards, since it both deals with fundamentals and undermines some habitual



angles of criticism, but most submitted manuscripts and perhaps most published fiction would be much stronger if the writers thereof had made intelligent application of an intelligent understanding of this principle. Perfection and success have in them the element of completeness, and completeness is a fundamental desire of the human being, partly because of the pleasant restfulness of its attainment.

I do not say that every story should reek with success and perfection, but I do say that before you even partly eliminate these factors you should have an intelligent understanding of what you are doing and should sacrifice them only for such other factors or elements as you are sure will more than compensate in the particular case.

Also I say, without hesitation or qualification, that, in the type of story containing little or no fundamental appeal other than a march of events and the success of a more or less perfect hero or heroine (the type that includes the large majority of submitted manuscripts) the application of this principle means an incalculable increase in effectiveness. In other words, if the presentation of

success and perfection constitutes a fundamental appeal to readers, see to it that you give these things in rich measure unless you compensate fully for their absence or partial absence.

Note that these elements are given lavishly in the "dime-novel" type of story. This is probably the lowest type of all (not because of the superabundance of action, but because of unnaturalness and all-round poor workmanship), yet its audience is huge and its hold on them tremendous. And if you think this audience is limited to the unsophisticated and the very young, you are vastly mistaken; that hold is too fundamental for a majority of even our cultured classes to escape from if it is given fair opportunity. To advance exciting and abundant action as the sole cause for this hold, as is commonly done, does not sufficiently account for it. The proof is that practically none of these stories is willing to trust to action alone for popularity. They almost always include another factor. And that factor is the double one of the success and perfection of the hero. The authors of such stories may include this factor only because they have seen others do so and may

not analyze beyond "people like it," but in that analysis they are thinking straighter and truer than are most of the learned and scholarly exponents and critics of the writing art who lose themselves, their goal and their followers in a maze of artificial regulations and meaningless formalities.

*Reality.*—To preserve balance, let us leap to the opposite point of view and review in our minds what was said in the chapter on convincingness. For the reader's pleasure in vicarious success and perfection to have soundness and stability, or for any other fiction purpose I can conceive, the story world must be a reproduction of our real world or of a modified real world consistent within itself. Part of a reader's fiction enjoyment lies in his familiarity with things presented, in finding things in their proper place, in the vanity of "I know that already." That a hero should attain remarkably complete success is acceptable to our reason because such success is frequently attained in real life. But a hero made remarkably perfect in all respects is likely to be too much for our common sense and to break the story's hold on us. "There ain't no such animile;" we know it, and, how-

ever much the joys of vicarious perfection may lure us along through the story, the illusion is seriously weakened.

The obvious remedy is a balanced middle course.

*Giving Characters Strong Appeal.*—In following this middle course the need in fiction to-day, aside from the dime-novel type, is more emphasis on the perfection element, not less. (Incidentally, it would help characterize a hero, and an appalling percentage of submitted manuscripts *lack even that amount of characterization.*) Give your hero or heroine sufficient faults and weak points to make him as human and fallible as you please, but give him also the strong elemental appeal of being close to the limit of human perfection in one or two traits of character, or physical or mental characteristics, or along one or possibly two lines of ability. Unless, of course, you are fully prepared to counteract the loss of this valuable asset with other elements. A sadly large proportion of would-be writers are not thus prepared, and many a story by a skilled author could have been improved by an understanding use of this element.

The same principles apply in less degree to minor characters. Villains, of course, aim at perfection in evil and their success generally must cease at whatever point will render the hero's success most effective, but in their case the conflict between naturalness and success-perfection is often easily avoided by the simple and effective device of giving your villain a quite human allowance of commendable or pleasing perfections, leaving the net villain-product as evil as you please—the engaging villain, the fascinating rascal, the merely human trouble-maker.

The usual fundamental compensation for a story's lack of perfection and success appeal is the appeal to the reader's sympathy *with* elements similar to those in himself or his life, including the appeal to his sympathy *for* those suffering or enjoying as he has done. Personally I'm rather inclined to believe the substitute not quite so effective, the other appeal seeming the more elemental and therefore the stronger of the two. Lewes' definition can be made sufficiently inclusive if we say that fiction's hold is due to its enabling the human being to live life vicariously, at his own pleasure, on his own initia-

tive and always as the ultimate controller of destiny, since he can at any moment toss the story aside, wiping out the entire story world. But if this is so, isn't it safe to say that the normal human being on the whole prefers pleasure to pain and finds more pleasure in success and perfection than in failure and imperfection? Psychologists can justly retort with, "But what are pleasure and pain?" The common-sense answer to that is that the psychologists can't agree among themselves upon a definition, that fiction is not written for psychologists but for people in general, and that most of us have a sufficiently definite idea of what pleases people in general and what is disagreeable to them.

When you come to the chapter on "Character" consider in connection with some of the points suggested there the points here suggested as to perfection of hero. Both there and here it might pay to run over in your mind the story characters that have best stood the test of ages, from "Achilles," "Ulysses" and the faithful "Achates" up to modern times. Best of all, forget you are a writer and as a reader shake yourself free for a few moments from all book learning and culture, all

preconceived ideas, all opinions of all critics and very particularly free from self-deception. Reduce yourself thus to a plain, common or garden human being, open to any natural impulses or likings and honestly willing to recognize and confess them. Then pick out the heroes or heroines you most enjoy, that have the strongest hold on your liking, being careful not to test by the literary criteria that have been imposed on you. If you do this honestly and keenly you may not wholly agree with my point of view, but I'll venture you'll consider your time well spent and that your allegiance to various learned dicta may be somewhat shaken. Particularly if you habitually identify yourself with the heroes as you read, don't you find yourself reveling in a hero's superior wit, grace, comeliness, strength or skill? Isn't this proud joy in him something deeper and more abiding than tests imposed by sophistication? Be honest.

To get at the whole matter from a different angle, don't human beings like to idealize?

One other point. When the world was young the individual rose or fell, lived or died, in accordance with the degree of his

physical strength, skill, courage and beauty. Mental and moral values were later factors. The physical is the most elemental, the most deeply rooted, in the race. Also, so long as we have wars and policemen, it remains the strongest, the court of last appeal. A thousand years from now it may have sunk into comparative oblivion, but even then the racial instinct of respect and admiration for it will persist. If you doubt its greater hold on human beings at large, forget books and study people—not just one class or type but people in general. No, I am not a materialist; the moral or mental can overcome the physical, but it is the physical that is there first, that is the more elemental in matters of liking and disliking, the strongest in natural impulse. And what I am trying to drive home is the need of greater consideration of the elemental likes and dislikes of readers, for they are being forgotten under the more vocal and visible likes and dislikes imposed by a civilization and culture often artificial and therefore weaker.

Why not, then, whenever you can do so without sacrifice of values more important to the particular case (as you generally can),



see to it that your hero makes this fundamental appeal in some way?

On the other hand, remember the facts of life. Listen to the following from William Ashley Anderson, a writer who, though an American, fought through the British East African campaign and has spent a good many of his years in meeting life in the raw at far corners of the world as well as life in its softer centers:

"Villains who always look like monsters strike me as burlesque.

"Villainous-looking men are frequently good-hearted and heroic. Good-looking men may be fiends. Character is really indicated more by expression than features—and a clever villain can control his expression. Primitive types, of course, betray themselves most easily. The expression of the most cruel men is usually dull, stupid, hungry—or with a look of wildness or concentration in the eyes. A good man, drunk, may become an arch-villain. His looks then might be the looks of an arch-villain; sober, he might have the appearance of an angel. 'Lucifer was the most beautiful of all the angels'!

"By the same token the employment of handsome, powerful heroes is often exasperating. On the average, handsome men are less likely to be brave than homely men—because of the very fact that they are handsome; and a man with pretty features seldom has a strong character (since the character is

often spoiled by too much praise in youth, or too much flattery from women after reaching adolescence). You remember Cæsar's encounter with Pompey, when the former instructed his hard-bitten veterans to strike at the faces of the handsome soldiers of Pompey.

"It is a fact that a man conscious of a handsome set of teeth recoils more at the thought of losing several of them from a blow than he does at the idea of broken limbs."

*Poor Heroes, Heroines and Villains.*—By all means do not idealize into such perfection and success that your characters are unhuman and unconvincing, but, I implore you, in making them human do not add any recruits to the great army of main characters who are unintentionally presented as imbecile. Sometimes carelessness is responsible for this stupidity, but generally the cause is the writer's surrender to the difficulties of plot—it is so easy to keep the plot machinery clanking along by having the hero become a temporary idiot. Misunderstanding may be the basis of tragedy and drama, but a man can misunderstand without qualifying for an asylum for the feeble-minded.

Please also lend your efforts to the needed work of abolishing the heroine, supposed to

be all that is most worth striving for, who is really empty of everything except vanity, false pride, cruelty and sublime selfishness—who, at her worst, offers her hand to the winner of a contest or the performer of some feat. I wish some one would organize a writers' league whose members were pledged either not to let their heroes leap into the arena at her bidding or to have them, after recovering her glove, throw it in her face. But I fear she will continue to hold sway undetected, as she does in real life. Perhaps the heroes are as bad, but I am a man myself.

*Moral Values.*—Nearly all people are moral to the extent of preferring good to bad when they have nothing at stake, as, for example, when reacting to merely imaginary people in a story. They side with the hero against the villain.

Readers with a discriminating sense of moral values are likely to be alienated by a character, supposed to be good, who is made to act contrary to good morals or ethics by the apparently unconscious author. Readers without this discriminating sense are a moral responsibility laid upon the author; he is culpable if he still further befogs their dis-

crimination between right and wrong by winning their approval of a character and then letting that character seduce them unawares into bad ethics.

Fiction is more than a reflection of the times; it is a builder of its contemporaneous thought and morality. If I were asked to name the five greatest influences upon the character of a people I should most emphatically include fiction and it would be nearer first than last among the five. Watch its effect upon your child. If you are of an analytical turn, seek far back in memory for the origin of your own ethical standards and ideals, or for the influences that strengthened or weakened them. Watch the mass of people respond to the standards held up by fiction—and by the drama, motion-pictures and other forms of art. Do not swallow the excuse that they “only give what the people demand”; those of you on the “inside” will know better.

I know the defenses offered for the picaresque story. I am familiar with the plea of “art for art’s sake.” It seems to me mere idle talk. Art is for life, not life for art, and if art, however justified by its own laws, pol-

lutes the soul of a people, then the cause of that pollution should be wiped out.

Realism and the spread of knowledge can justify a picture of life as it is, though too often the author's real interest is not in the reality of what he presents but in its ugliness. An author is justified in using fiction as an instrument against what he sincerely believes mistaken morality, though his own morality is impeached if he ventures his dissent without most anxious consideration of the seriousness of what he is doing. But there is no excuse whatever for presenting ugliness as beauty, crime dressed in honor, vice as admirable, crookedness as amusing, rottenness as normal, evil as good. He who makes a criminal a hero is playing with hell-fire, if I may use so old-fashioned a metaphor. He who writes a story of crime triumphant is a debaucher of public morals. He who presents, however bedecked and disguised, a parasite, a fop, a hypocrite, a brute, a crook, as admirable is a dry-rot in the heart of the people. He who fills his stories with sex, not for the purposes of honest realism but for the sake of sex-exciting more nickels from human beings, is far lower and less courageous than the pimp.

I can not ask you to accept my point of view in these matters, yet, because of the broadcast, invidious evil involved and because the morality of fiction seems a thing seldom touched upon by text-books, I do ask that you weigh your responsibilities. A surprising number of offenses are purely inadvertent and are eagerly corrected by the authors when pointed out, for most writers are not evil in intent. These slips, at least, can be more guarded against, for they are due more to lack of careful weighing than to lack of a moral sense. One common and easily detected lapse is the use of the principle that the end justifies the means—the philanthropic criminal, for example, by emulating whom any one can justify almost anything he wishes to do.

From the purely practical point of view these things are for the most part irritations to the discriminating. Often with the indiscriminating they add nothing to the story's effectiveness, though operating in real life after the story itself is forgotten. As to the popular and financial success of polluting fiction you will notice that the public is sufficiently sound usually to react eventually,

especially if given half a chance, against the very thing it has embraced.

*Needless Offenses.*—Write it down in red ink that any slur upon any religion that creeps into your story will cause everything else to be forgotten by some of your readers in their indignation over that affront. And make up your mind that anything offering even the most remote possibility of being twisted into a slur will assuredly be so twisted. Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Scientists, all have representatives with chips balanced on the edge of their shoulders. Generally the slur is taken as a deliberate insult on the part of both author and editor, often as sure evidence of a systematic campaign of propaganda. If the hero happens to be a minister, priest, rabbi or reader, other sects accuse you of propaganda in favor of the particular religion involved. If the villain happens to be one of these, then it is followers of the religion involved who complain. More, the villain need be only a follower of some religion to convict you of felonious assault upon that religion itself.

Fortunately, villains generally have no religion to speak of, but sometimes it is essential

to the story's best interests to include them at least formally in some particular fold. When it is, do so, taking care to avoid any faint suggestion of connection between their villainy and their faith. The type of mind that considers the villainy of a single fictional character an attack on a religion as a whole can be given consideration only within the bounds of reason.

Readers are sensitive, too, on the subject of race. We have a saying in the office that the only safe villain is an atheist American. Since 1917 atheist Germans can be used; in fact, they are being used until the monotony of it is wearing. A Swede as villain is taken by some as sure sign of malignant persecution of the Swedes, an English hero proves anti-Irish propaganda, of late even Mexicans and Spaniards begin to protest against a fellow countryman's being used as villain, thus robbing authors of a time-honored resource.

Even local pride rallies to the attack if fiction happens to paint its locality in unpleasant colors.

Write your story according to its just demands, but avoid needlessly trampling upon the toes of any of your readers. Sore toes



are not conducive to the imposition of successful illusions. >

*Positive vs. Negative Plots.*—Lack of consideration of this fundamental question leads many writers into losing, unconsciously and often needlessly, one strong, elemental hold upon the sympathies of their readers.

Human beings like a hero better than a villain. They enjoy success more than failure, construction better than destruction. Consequently they derive more pleasure from following to success the fortunes of a hero, with whom they sympathize or identify themselves, than from following to failure the fortunes of a villain, who stands always for the opposition. Both appeals are strong, but the point is that the first is essentially the stronger.

Analyze a little further the reader's reactions to a negative plot. The villain is the central character, the course of whose fortunes forms the thread of the story. The reader, of course, knows this from the start. He knows, too, from experience with fiction, that this villain is almost surely doomed to failure and possibly death and that the interest of the story lies in watching him be

hunted down, defeat his own ends or get caught in a net. A strong interest, assuredly, but inherently second in strength and lure to that of a positive plot. In the first place, the reader knows that he is going to a funeral, real or metaphorical. Some people like that above all other things, but most do not. Vengeance is strong in appeal, but at best vengeance is only an attempted and inadequate compensation for loss of success or perfection. Second, the reader can give only divided interest and allegiance. He generally prefers that right should triumph, so he arrays his sympathies *against* the villain, but fiction experience has firmly fixed in him the habit of arraying himself *with* the central character, in this case the villain. The usual result is that his interest has to straddle—divide; he is at war with himself throughout the story. If the villain succeeds, the reader's moral sense is hurt. If the villain fails, the reader's primal sympathy with the central character of a narrative is hurt. He can't have an unrestrained good time no matter what happens. And his fundamental purpose in reading fiction is to have a good time.

Fiction with only positive plots would be monotonous and the negative plot gives a needed relief, but when you turn to it remember you are under the handicap of a weakened hold upon your readers.

*Restraint at the Wrong Time.*—Have you ever considered how often the reader is robbed of his vicarious enjoyment by being hurried on when he'd really like to stop and revel or gloat? For example, take the villain. After a career of hellish atrocities and maddening injuries to others, often causing years of suffering, he is paid back during the few seconds required to make a quick neat bullet-hole through his forehead or to plunge him over a cliff. I confess myself un-Christain enough to long for a more proportionate punishment. So do all other readers I have questioned.

Take the lost-treasure story for another bald, extreme example. After pursuing the treasure through a whole story of obstacles and strain you finally get it. The author tells you you have it and promptly drops the curtain. You don't get a chance to run the doubloons through your fingers, to finger the jewels, to sit on the bar silver, to review hap-

pily all the pleasant things you can do with it. Yet if you really found a treasure, in those first moments of final attainment all the long struggle for it might become as nothing and, in looking back, these might be the moments most vivid and colorful. Generally when story people find the treasure they don't seem to care a hang. In real life there would be drunkenness or delirium of joy. Edwin Lefèvre first called my attention to this cruelty by authors, vowing to write a treasure story in which the reader would have a real chance to gloat. If he does so, I've an idea most of us will get particular enjoyment therefrom.

And the love-story. The monotony of what is technically and vulgarly known as "the clinch at the end" is sound reason for not always carrying the reader quite that far along the path of true love, and yet, in spite of all our sophistication, don't most of us down in our hearts enjoy that satisfying culmination of the events we've been following with so much interest? Wasn't it what we wished to happen? Why, then, should we enjoy leaving before it does happen, carrying with us only a hint or an inference that

it would happen at all? To be sure, we can imagine the scene to suit each his own particular fancy instead of having to accept the author's, and, however individual the story may have been, the "clinch" is comparatively a standardized performance with fewer enticements of novelty, and yet—most human beings are human beings.

The above are crude illustrations, but they illustrate an important principle in the business of pleasing a reader. The usual failure to take advantage of the opportunity is only another one of the thousand losses of advantage resulting from not training writers to habitual weighing of the reader's reactions, particularly his elemental reactions. Proportionate space and emphasis in a story must be determined primarily by relation to plot, but the object of plot is interest and if you can, without much or any loss in general proportion, give the reader somewhat more play at this or that point for the natural reactions he wishes to exercise, why not pleasure him instead of suppressing him?

It is not a question of pleasant *versus* unpleasant reactions, but of whatever the reader happens to feel. It may be horror or

some other unhappy emotion for which he desires more time and space. The important thing is to give him what he desires.

*Talking Down to the Reader.*—Naturally no reader likes it and illusion suffers in consequence. Don't be a schoolmaster or an encyclopedia to him. If it's necessary to give him information, weave it gently and unobtrusively into the story. Don't tell him things he is almost sure to know already. Treat him as an equal; don't speak down to him from a superior height. It seems bad taste, as well as a loss in effectiveness, to ask a reader's interest in your characters and then sneer at them yourself. If you are asking him to join you in the sneering, he may prefer a more kindly and courteous attitude and be irritated at you and your invitation.

*General Irritations and a General Recipe.*—Most of the points covered in the last five chapters have general application to the reader's likes and dislikes.

Note this:

On most points bearing on the writing of fiction, a well-thought-out violation of the general rule or custom can often increase effectiveness. Old methods and formulas,

however sound as a general rule, lose in effect through endless repetition. They have become usual, have worn down their original hold, the reader knows what to expect. Give him something different and he is grateful. Merely to be on the lookout for such opportunities is good for you in that it keeps you from falling into the hopeless rut of routine and slavery to rules.

*First-Person Narratives.*—Do readers prefer them? I think nobody knows—nor will know until somebody takes a national census on the point. Why not decide the question solely according to the demands of the particular story and your own bent of ability, since readers are divided on the point? Some are irritated by too much “I” and by a point of view limited strictly to one angle; others like the unity and sharp definiteness of such a point of view and freedom from the author’s God-like ability to know so much of what goes on in the minds of all the characters.

*Fooling the Reader.*—Making a fool of a person is not likely to win his sympathy. There is a world of difference between legitimate surprise and deliberately making a

reader create and live in an illusion and then showing him he's a fool for having trusted you to guide him aright. The story that, at the very end, proves to have been all a dream (which the author led the reader into believing a reality) is an example of this kind of vaudeville horseplay.

*Two Setting Appeals.*—Some readers get the greater enjoyment from settings and material with which they are familiar, others from those as far removed as possible from their daily life. In the first case the appeal is probably that of realism mixed with the joys of self-conceit and pride of knowledge, in the second, probably of novelty and of the freedom from the imagination-fettering, homely, routine details that is so characteristic of most classic and some modern tragedy. Here again there is no comprehensive laboratory knowledge, and the reader's reaction should not be made the deciding factor when there is any doubt as to the author's comparative ability or the demands of the particular story itself.

In the case of the "costume" or "doublet and hose" story, as in some other kinds of unfamiliar setting, there is also the appeal of pageantry.



Temporary factors play their part in influencing readers' reactions. When the tide of war fiction began to ebb there was a noticeable reader reaction toward anything that would take one's thoughts away from the Great War. The magazines suddenly shut their doors against stories of the war, but the mere absence of these was not enough: there arose a noticeable demand for fiction that would carry one clear out of these modern times into past eras of greater simplicity and less wholesale horror. War itself was not tabooed, but it must be war of the old-fashioned kind.

## CHAPTER XI

### PLOT AND STRUCTURE

THROUGHOUT all nature, throughout the universe so far as we know it, there is a basic tendency toward unity and growth. The tendency is of course present in the human mind. That is why the human mind demands plot and structure in fiction. In nature's higher manifestations of plant and animal the demand for unity progresses into a demand for organic structure, an assemblage of parts whose respective offices and limitations are determined by their relation to the whole and which therefore, in addition to their intrinsic value, assume a relative value that *outranks the intrinsic*. Add to the tendencies of unity and growth a tendency toward limit of growth, or perfection. Fiction plot is the result of these three universal demands, and bearing them in mind is a sound foundation from which to consider all problems in connection with plot.

A similar process of reasoning from elemental beginnings would, if relentlessly applied to the laws, traditions and superstitions of art, do more than anything else to free it from chaff, artificialities and misconceptions that have attached themselves to it.

There is even advantage in considering examples from nature for the sake of clearer understanding of the nature and requirements of plot. You already know what plot is, but see whether comparison with the following will not crystallize your concept of it to a degree that will make you largely independent of rules and regulations:

A river-system, a river and its network of tributaries, is like a plot. A unity with growth in a single general direction with its mouth as climax or limit of growth; many elements combining smoothly and perfectly into one.

The tap-root and subsidiary roots of many plants furnish a similar illustration. A tree's framework is an inverted example.

A rope of vines or, more clearly, a man-made piece of rope in the process of making with the loose strands gathered at one end into a closely knit main line.

A snow-slide forced by the terrain to converge all its material into a narrow gap at the foot of the slope.

It would be, I think, a pity if all trees and all river-systems were made in strict accordance with one pattern, as the rules so largely demand of plot-building. Yet either tree or river-system would be no longer such—and a sad spectacle indeed—if it were cut into bits, were large where it should be small or were otherwise changed from its essential nature.

*Structure.*—It has been said that the short story is far more exacting than the novel in demand for strict unification and rigid enforcement of relative values. That is true in practise and I am not sure that it isn't true in theory. Perhaps the novel escapes through mere laziness or inability of writer and reader to create and receive so large a unit perfectly constructed in all its many details. Perhaps, on the other hand, the novel is a more natural expression by the writer and a more natural and desired form for the reader. Perhaps, if we draw the distinction between novel and romance, only the latter should be held to the strict requirements of short-story structure.

To take the form of strictest requirements, I have found only one rule that seems in practise to produce satisfactory results:

The short story has one main point and only one. It may be the climax of a course of events, an aspect of life, a psychological impasse, what you will. But there must be only *one* of it. Every other element in the story, every scrap of material, every bit of color, every human trait, *everything* in the story, must be subsidiary to the main point. No elements are even admitted to the story unless they serve in developing the main point. When admitted they get space and emphasis only in proportion to that service. No one of them is valuable in itself; their values are wholly relative, not intrinsic. (Of course, there is no reason for not abandoning this principle on occasion if you are *sure* you can better satisfy your readers by so doing.)

*Violations of Unity.* — Compelling your reader to follow alternately two sets of characters in two sets of scenes is dangerous, since it violates unity unless the reader is kept keenly conscious of their inevitable convergence upon one point. Hopping back and forth in the time of the action is in most

cases fatal to unity. Shifting the point of view is objected to on grounds of violated unity—telling your story first from the angle from which events are seen by one character, then from the angle of another character or from that of the author.

Do not leave loose strands dangling along your rope, like a minor character who vanishes without needed explanation, or a line of endeavor suddenly abandoned without a word.

Too many characters are not only an obstacle to clearness but greatly increase the difficulty of unification.

Do not attempt to include too much material, color, life-history or anything else. If your story refuses to unify satisfactorily it may be because you are using more elements than you are able to handle. Even if you can handle all you have, be sure that the expanse of your canvass is not greater than the reader can look at conveniently and without missing some of it. In a general way it is well to tuck it in at the edges, so to speak, and enclose it in a fairly definite picture-frame.

*Holding Reader to Correct Plot Line.*—It is

not sufficient to select and assemble the proper elements according to their relative values. The assignment of proper relative space and emphasis must be managed with such nicety that the reader can not mistake their common direction. He may be kept from knowledge of the goal, but he must know and feel that everything in the story, carrying him along with it, is sweeping along in one single general direction. If he is on a tributary flowing southwest he must know that it is a tributary, not the main stream, that it flows southwest and that the main stream, while it may flow southwest, south or southeast, will hardly flow north.

A reader tends to anticipate, to cast ahead. Make sure that, while you hold from him sufficient to make any desired surprise effective, he does not waste his attention-strength by casting ahead over false trails leading away from your general direction. In other words, keep him in hand from start to finish, being sure his feet follow *your* path in *your* direction.

To instill a sense of plot, one must either go into endless rules, exceptions, diagrams and analyses or else present only the funda-

mentals and commoner guide-posts, leaving the writer to develop his own ability. There has been too much of the former method and I shall not attempt to add further initiative-killing rules, particularly as I believe that the majority of fiction rules can often be violated with good results.

*Non-Conformist Plot and Structure.*—No rule for fiction has a sound basis unless it is grounded on some such elemental in human nature as an instinctive desire for growth, unity, completeness, a rounded-out whole, symmetry, rhythm, contrast, and so forth. But even an elemental desire can be led to the point of temporary satiety, even contrast itself. Monotony is undoubtedly monotonous.

Consider the reader. Fed year after year with the results of the same rules, with the same literary devices, the same general plots and endings, the same signs along the way, isn't his appetite for standard food sure to be dulled at intervals? He is far wiser and more sophisticated in fiction than you probably think; if he goes right on eating standard food it is often because he finds a scarcity of other kinds. Why not study the condition of



his appetite, estimating from how much of certain kinds of food he has had to eat and for how long, and then make a business of feeding him a new kind until he tires of it in turn? A most unliterary suggestion? Perhaps, but I should not wholly relish the task of proving it such.

There are, at least, certain fashions in fiction and even in "literature" that change and change back with the years. The costume story reigns, sinks into oblivion, reigns again. The author chats himself into his stories, keeps out of them, enters once more to chat again. Romance and realism alternate in favor. The critics permit it, though sneering perhaps at each change, just as they are inclined to sneer at both change and permanence themselves.

Why not other changes? For example, more changes from the rules of plot? Many fairly radical changes, indeed, could be made without violation of the really fundamental rules.

Here is the story of an interesting laboratory experiment on the reactions of readers. During the war our managing editor was stationed in one of the largest officers' train-

ing camps. He made a business of watching the reactions of his comrades to magazine fiction and of course to our own magazine in particular. It happened that an author asked me to decide a question for him. He was writing a novelette around an historical character and found himself on the horns of a dilemma. Either he must do extreme violence to the facts of that famous person's life, particularly as to sequence of events, or else abandon any attempt at a real fiction plot. I suggested that he abandon the attempt at plot and structure and make the story practically a mere running narrative.

In the training camp the results of that experiment were startling and very suggestive. Among all the stories in books and magazines that structureless novelette reported by far the most comment and praise. The most valuable point was that the readers were sufficiently analytical to know, and state, exactly why they liked it: "Different from other stories." "Couldn't tell what was going to happen." "Couldn't predict the end after reading a third of the way." "Like real life."

Many of them had read numerous other stories by the same author, Hugh Pendexter,

dealing with similar material and times, but all these stories had conformed to the laws of plot and structure. Practically none of the readers was sufficiently familiar with the historical character's life to know the material in advance.

Another laboratory experiment. One day in the office some one suggested we hadn't had a "desert island" story for a long while and ought to get one. All agreed, but of course with no enthusiasm; all of us could tell that story in its essentials before it was even written. Then some one wished they'd write "desert island" stories that were different. All seven of us fell to outlining the kind we'd like personally. All seven agreed. All wanted the usual "props" left out and all wanted the castaways to have a real and a realistic struggle for existence—"no self-sacrificing fish," as one put it. There were to be no practical specialists like engineers, sailors, carpenters and botanists in the party. Just every-day people like ourselves.

Then we figured that, if this was the kind of story all of us craved, there were probably many readers, just as sophisticated or "fed up" as we, who also would welcome this de-

parture. We presented the problem to J. Allan Dunn, asking whether he cared to write a "desert island" novelette without any of the usual material therefor, no savages, volcanoes, women, cocoanuts, socialism, rival party, tropical vegetation, fierce beasts, animals waiting for domestication, no specialists in the party, no supplies to draw from, nothing, not even a pen-knife or watch-crystal. Each of us wrote out a list of the things he knew or could do that might be useful in the circumstances—unspecialized and, mostly, meager lists.

He accepted, after justified hesitation. We modified our terms to permit him wild dogs and wild boars for excitement, meat and leather, but it was understood that action, interest and whatever plot proved possible were to be drawn from the barehanded struggle with nature for existence.

The conditions and circumstances were given to our readers along with the published story. It won a stronger response from them than had any other story we'd published for several years. This from the audience of a magazine devoted primarily to action stories of which the usual "desert island" story is a

fairly representative type, though it must be admitted that this audience has been recruited from among those who prefer more nourishing meat along with the action, insist upon a sound basis of fact or probability and are too sophisticated not to have tired of the usual hack melodrama.

These two experiments are at least suggestive. You can doubtless recall from your own experience stories that registered strongly on you because of variance from the usual types. Generally, if the story succeeds, the variance is attributed to genius or unusual gifts; as a matter of fact it is in most cases due either to accident or to a mere common-sense study of readers and what can be expected to have dulled their appetites.

*Ending a Story.*—Variance from type in the ending is of particular value. It must, of course, be an ending logically belonging to the story, but surprise, or at least change, is entirely possible.

Yet is there any escape from the "happy ever after" ending of a love-story? I suppose and hope so, but have my doubts except as to the rarest instances. A love-story without at least the suggestion of marriage or its sub-

stitute as ending seems considered almost as desolate as a love-story without either love or story. Renunciation is a reversal of "happy ever after" rather than a variation, and not generally popular. Death is very grudgingly accepted as a substitute. I've made earnest effort to secure variants—parties decide to be friends instead, one party proves to love a third party or grows weary of the second, parties quarrel and omit making up, death of either or of all hands, anything for a change. No results except a death-rate well under one per cent.

Perhaps it is because writers believe editors will not accept variants from the "happy ever after." I suspect their belief is well founded, but I wonder whether in this case the editorial attitude is not solidly based on a downright insistence from human-being readers.

Unhappy endings? The minority like them, the majority do not. I can venture nothing more except that the size of the minority increases if the line is drawn not between "unhappy" and "happy" but between endings that leave the reader depressed and those that leave him uplifted. Through the

latter, with their appeal of pathos or high tragedy, there is decided opportunity for comparative variation from the usual.

At the end of a story I think most readers rather resent loose strands of plot left untied, like minor characters of whose future no glimpse is afforded or some minor enterprise that has run through the plot only to have its fate a mystery at the end. Skill, particularly in unifying severely to the central point, can make the reader forget the disappearance of minor strands at the very end, but it is well to remember that most readers have a healthy sense of legitimate curiosity.

*Beginning a Story.*—At the first word of your story the reader knows nothing concerning it except what title, illustrations and contents-page may have told him. Generally he doesn't know whether it is laid in Africa, Alaska or New York City, or whether it is of to-day, 1890 or 1700. The more quickly you tell him, the more quickly can you draw him into your illusion. If you wait, you almost certainly confuse and irritate him. Story after story comes in to editors that leaves the reader groping and unable to settle down until long after it is under way; often

he doesn't learn where he is until he has wandered through several pages. Even a paragraph is too long a wait—and waste. You need not make a business of placarding date and place, but there are a myriad ways of introducing him quickly to both. Failure to do this is so common and so extremely injurious to the story's effectiveness that it affords a most striking example of the disastrous effects of giving more attention to rules than to common sense and of not drilling into the very bones of writers the necessity of watching and measuring their stories constantly from the point of view of readers.

Another common and bad mistake is to present any but a main character first, preferably *the* main character. Indeed, in the short story perfect unification almost demands that he be first on the stage. But there is a common-sense reason aside from that of unity and centralization. Long experience with fiction has taught readers that the first character to appear is nearly always the main character, therefore whatever character gets the initial spot-light is promptly seized upon by them as the main one. If he isn't, they have to let go of the story illusion they are already building and start



building a new one around a new center and feel rather foolish or cheated and irritated. As in the case of not setting time and scene, the writer has failed to hold them to the correct plot line—even to start them on it. Of what avail is knowledge of technique, or the present method of teaching technique, if it fails to impress such horse-sense points as these? Sufficient skill can introduce the central character when and how it pleases, but most writers lack it.

In the case of the drama there is no harm in minor characters appearing first. Stage custom has established this, not the other, as the custom. Also, the stage, being better able to study its patrons at first-hand, has realized the catastrophe of letting them stray from the correct plot line and guards against it by giving out programs in advance as keys to caste (with characters listed in order of appearance), scene, time and sometimes even more; the rise of the curtain instantly gives the audience its bearings in a general way, and star, scene, time and even plot are frequently known before entering the theater. Writers of fiction could profit tremendously by careful study of the necessarily practical technique—or common sense—of the theater.

## CHAPTER XII

### CHARACTER

FOR broadest popularity possibly the prime single requisite in fiction is action plot, but, if so, character drawing is at least a close second. Human nature's interest in human nature is undying and intense. By the tests of the somewhat indefinite thing we call literature, character probably ranks first. Action, on the other hand, seems the more primitive and the more fundamental; early man undoubtedly acted first and thought later; when he learned to analyze his fellows it was for purposes of action.

*An Experiment.*—It is interesting to look back over the centuries and consider the stories that have had sufficient hold to endure. Which do you remember first and the most distinctly, "Sherlock Holmes," "Mulaney," "Richard Feveril," "Amyas Leigh," "John Silver," "Becky Sharpe," "Old

Scrooge," "Quasimodo," "Don Quixote," "Falstaff," "Hamlet," "Lady Macbeth," "Faust," etc., or the plots and action in which they were concerned? "Arthur," "Tristan," "Roland," "Siegfried," "Finn McCool," etc., or their adventures? "Aeneas," "Hector," "Ulysses," etc., or what they did?

I have made no laboratory tests on other people, so can risk no conclusions from this test beyond venturing that, as the race grew older and its literature developed, character interest tended to take first place over the more primitive action appeal. Make your own tests, allowing for the differences between stories of the last few centuries and those of long ago. After trying out yourself, try out as many other people as you can. If you do, you'll get valuable knowledge—and understanding—not likely to be found in books.

You'll get not only some useful fundamental ideas on the values and relative values of plot and character, but possibly, by contrast with others, a sound idea as to whether your real bent is for plot or for character, and, best of all, you will have done something toward forming or strengthening

the laboratory habit of examining facts instead of swallowing at theories, and the habit of thinking for yourself instead of using the weakening crutch of accepting other people's theories that they in turn probably accepted from other people *ad infinitum*.

In any case character drawing—human nature—is one of the two most important elements in fiction. Yet the lack of it marks the majority of submitted manuscripts. In many of these cases it is an utter, total, complete, absolute lack, unless you count the crude class distinction between hero and villain. Characters are merely proper names, lucky if there is even an individualized or slightly individualized physical body to cling to, and twice lucky if said body has clothes or habits of its own. You can lift them out of one story and substitute them in another with no damage to them or to either story and with decided profit in the case of the first. It is pitiful—and maddening.

The tragedy of it is that it can easily be remedied by any writer of average human intelligence. All he needs for comparatively decent characterization is a certain very simple recipe.

*A Recipe.*—I don't know whose recipe it is, having heard it years ago and forgotten his name, though I think its accredited father dates back a century or so, but he should be crowned in honor and the use of his recipe made compulsory by law. Apparently not one writer in ten thousand ever even heard of it.

You can dig out that recipe for yourself by the laboratory method advocated above, if you will trace English literature back toward its beginnings. And if I give you a broad hint by suggesting a bit of thoughtful, practical consideration of the morality plays, you should have no trouble at all.

There it is, simple, elemental, effective—*assign to each person in your story one single trait of character and make him show it by actions, words, thoughts.*

Carry it into as much detail as possible. If I remember aright, the recipe's reputed father took as example a character whose one trait was cruelty and said that if he were made to walk in a garden he must be made to knock off the heads of flowers with his cane as he passed.

That's as far as the recipe goes, so far as

I remember, but try a second elementary step—show the reaction of this single predominant trait upon the other persons in the story, in what they say to him, do to him, think of him, always, of course, in the light of their own single traits.

Third step: Assign one or more persons a second trait, a minor trait, and proceed as before.

Try it, if you are not beyond the need of fundamental suggestions as to characterization. You will not only reap a rich harvest of concrete results but will also be getting a most excellent training.

Only a few days ago I was told of a case in which it has had a thorough test. I've never read anything by the author in question, but know that he turns out a consistent and steady flow of books whose sales are enormous though treated with condescension by critics of literature. The report is that in the actual writing of his stories he does not even give names to his characters but uses the name of the predominant traits he assigns to them—Cruelty, Honesty, Vanity, and so on. When the story is finished he, or perhaps his secretary, goes through the manu-

script, strikes out these names of traits and gives each character whatever name meets general requirements. *Voilà!* Personally, I'd give a good deal to know what would happen to his sales if he abandoned this method and the kind of characterization it produces—to know, rather, whether he would ever have had enormous sales if he had not used this recipe.

Just using the morality plays—and *Pilgrim's Progress*—as a sound foundation. Maybe it's funny, but maybe you could profit by it yourself. Heaven knows that plenty of writers could!

*Tags.*—If I could, I'd hang over almost every writer's desk a large card bearing in very black letters these words:

“Remember that yours is not the only story in the world and that it has to compete for the reader's attention with countless other stories. Your interest in it is particularized and personal; his is not. Also, you already know everything in the story; he does not. You may have failed to put on paper part of what you know; in that case he will never know it.

“Remember that your reader has met many

people in real life, forgotten all about most of them, including their names, and that in the great number of stories he has read he has met a far greater number of fictitious people who, along with their names, fail in even greater proportion than have the real people to register upon his attention, interest and memory. You are merely adding a few more to his hundreds of thousands. The competition is heavy. You can make *no* headway against it if your story-persons are only names, almost none if they are only mildly individualized and characterized, little enough even if they are drawn fairly strongly.

“Remember, too, that when you introduce him to more than two or three new people they have to compete, also, among themselves—that he is likely to have difficulty even in straightening them out in his mind and connecting the right name with each character. If you wish your people to get and hold his attention and to have any place in his memory, you must strive with all your might to *mark* each character, to individualize each character, by every means within your reach. If you have not a natural gift



for character drawing, use elementary methods."

The particular elementary, and very effective, method I have in mind is to hang on to each character one or more of what in the writing of plays are called, I believe, tags. It can be called, if you like, advertising your characters. Most of them need it. Or might be likened to the use of motifs in opera. Or you might find it even an approximation to the conventions of real life.

Put a strongly individualized label on each of your characters and make the readers keep looking at it. This character continually introduces his speeches with "Well now"; that one is always nervously hitching up his trousers at the knees; John Jones is so interested in golf that he is perpetually dragging it into conversation; Myrtle is always tittering; Brown is conspicuously careful of his personal appearance, while his brother George wears anything that comes handy and Sister Isabel has almost a monomania for red; Judson habitually looks into the eyes of people with an intent gaze that is hard to meet; Henry in appearance and manner suggests a sheep; the peculiar blackness of

Maude's eyes is her most marked and impressive feature.

Never let a character remain long on the stage without presenting his tag. It individualizes more strongly than a name. It is a most useful guide-post to the reader. It strongly reinforces character-drawing and may even serve as a cheap substitute, a substitute at any price being preferable to nothing. Also, it becomes an *asset in itself*, an element of appeal that runs the range from farce to tragedy and you can mix or alternate these or other appeals with strong results. Its effect is cumulative. There is for its intrinsic value a sound grounding in fundamental human nature—a reader's unconscious pride and vanity in "detecting" it as characteristic, in being able to forecast its coming, his interest and consequent like or dislike for tags in real life, his comfort in having mental tasks made easy.

Of course, if you've drawn real character for the persons in your story, make their tags consistent with character—or, rarely, in deliberate and evident contrast. Equally, of course, a tag, like any other good thing, must be handled with judgment and not allowed to run riot.

*Results from Tags and High-Point Characterization.*—Study the following fiction characters that have made a big and lasting “hit,” so much so that they have been carried through a series of books: “Sherlock Holmes,” “Captain Kettle,” “Don Q.,” “Brigadier Gerard,” “Tartarin,” “D’Artagnan,” “Athos,” “Porthos,” “Aramis,” “Mulvaney,” “Ortheris,” “Learoyd,” “Allen Quartermain,” “Wallingford”; consider also some characters of Dickens. Some of these are well-drawn and well rounded out, but others reduce to the bare bones of the “one-trait recipe” and the use of tags, really very elementary creations. Yet all are made vivid and individualized by means of tags and strongly emphasized traits of character. While the tags, for the most part, are handled with at least a fair degree of skill, the characterization in some cases, though of course not limited to a single trait, is incomplete, very elementary and not very well done. Yet all have gained a strong popular success, not just from the stories in which they appear, but as characters.

It is clear from the above that while the “one-trait recipe” and the use of tags do not necessarily spell literature they are by no

means incompatible with it. They are merely first steps toward really good character depiction. Their importance in any teaching of fiction is due chiefly to the lamentable fact that most writers do not take or even see them.

Even advanced writers can often profit from consideration of their values. For example, in a certain successful series of novellettes and novels told in the first person but centering on another character, the narrator was almost entirely lacking in tags and salient character traits and didn't even have a name, or a past, or a body, or, often, clothes until well along in the series. He was consistently drawn, so far as he went, but almost colorless and with little grip on interest and memory, though having a prominent place in the plot and not thus subordinated for the sake of relative values and unity around the central character. The central character was strongly drawn, tags and all, and the series as a whole had so many other merits that the colorlessness of the fictitious narrator could not wreck it, but its improvement was very marked when he was developed and brought to his proper place in the lime-light by the tags and salient traits needed in addition to the general filling in.

*Characterization in General.*—I attempt no covering of the subject, desiring only to bring out the points that the general in-flow of manuscripts shows are, in practise, most in need of attention. There are already hosts of books giving detailed instructions, theories, examples, analyses and exercises. Some of them are useful and valuable in many cases. In general they seem to me likely to be dangerous, unless the student uses exceptional care, in that they are likely to encourage a tendency toward mechanics instead of art, artificiality instead of naturalness, strain and limitation instead of freedom, and copying instead of art. I am aware that tags and the “one-trait recipe” seem open to the same charge, but their saving clause is that they can teach the writer how to develop himself rather than how to turn out finished work by rule. Also the present need of them in practise is appalling, and perhaps that need would not be so great if writers had been trained by more naturalistic methods.

The only sound and comprehensive rule for characterization is:

Study people, first as subjects, second as recipients of the knowledge you have gained.

## CHAPTER XIII

### INDIVIDUALITY VS. TECHNIQUE

YEAR after year editors sit at their desks and almost at a single glance reject anywhere from sixty to ninety per cent. of the manuscripts that come in, and, on the whole, they make few mistakes in so doing. Some of these summarily rejected ones are so illiterate that most freshmen in college would unhesitatingly turn them down, but on the majority is the damning and almost unmistakable brand of "no individuality"—merely another manuscript plodding blindly along in the machine-like effort to turn out by machine-like methods another one "like those they've read," another stilted, unnatural attempt at producing a life-like copy of a model denaturalized, by them or their teachers, into a mechanical and artificial collection of rags, bones and hanks of hair that has never known the breath of life.

*Lack of Individuality.*—How can the editor tell at a glance? How in heaven's name can he help telling? He's read the same kind of thing—the same thing except for variations of theme and setting—thousands and thousands and thousands of times before until recognizing it at a glance is as easy as recognizing a trolley-car among other vehicles on his way to the office of mornings. The tracks are no plainer in one case than the other.

But maybe the author does better farther on in the story? Doubtless it has happened, but the instances constitute a negligible factor. That poor editor learned to hunt no farther only by hunting farther thousands of times, when he was new and optimistic, and finding nothing. He has learned that any writer fool enough to begin a story in so stupid a way is too much a fool all the way along to be worth listening to.

Disbelieve this ability, if you like, and let's pass on to the stories he does *not* discard at a glance. These he reads to varying extents, according to their ability to hold him as an editor—sometimes a cursory examination, sometimes solid parts here and there, sometimes straight through, sometimes only part

way. Many things, including mistaken judgment, can stop him, but oftenest of all I believe it is the story's lack of individuality. He finds he's read it too many times before and knows that his readers have.

The sameness may be in plot, theme, style, anything or all together, but it's the sameness that stops him and kills the story. As a reader, judge for yourself from the stories that get published, after editors have discarded all but enough to fill their space—all but one to five per cent., say, of the total submitted. Is there not sufficient sameness in even these? Then judge what the discarded ninety-five or ninety-nine per cent. must be, making any reasonable allowance you please for the fallibility of editors.

*Reasons for the Lack.*—Much of the lack of individuality in stories is due to lack of individuality in the writers. To what degree a person can develop his individuality I do not presume to say, but lack of real individuality in his stories is curable to exactly that degree and no more.

But many of the writers whose stories show none, *have* individuality. Why doesn't it show in their work? Because they have been



taught by present methods of teaching fiction to be artificial, not natural, or have themselves slavishly modeled themselves after some one else.

What chance has your individuality if you turn your back on it and resolutely try to copy another man's, or if you lose yourself in an endless maze of rules and regulations? Rules and regulations imposed, for the most part, by people equally lost in the maze.

No, you can't let your individuality run riot regardless of all rules, for some rules are laws of the human mind to which all of us are subject. But it does not follow that you must assassinate your individuality. It is your main asset. Without it, neither empty rules nor sound laws can build anything of themselves.

Technique? Of course you need technique, but if you make of it a golden calf and bow down in worship, you perish.

Get technique; don't let it get you. What technique should give you is tools, not rules. And not a monomaniac collector's collection of tools, collected for the sake of including all tools known to man, but only those tools so well mastered that they fit almost automati-

cally into your hand, carrying out smoothly the guiding impulse of your brain.

But you have to learn to use them before you can acquire such skill? Yes, but remember the purpose of your learning—and don't try to learn and use more tools than you can master. Remember that an augur is an augur—that it's not a demand upon you to bore a hole in something, but only a means of making a hole when one is needed. Because a hammer is for driving nails do you have to use it when you're modeling in clay?

I dare say it is bad taste for me to criticize other books on writing fiction and other methods of teaching fiction, but, pardon me, I don't give a damn. For years I've sat and watched teachers, poorly equipped for the task and perfectly equipped for their manner of handling it, blandly do their utmost to ruin a writer by holding before his wide eyes so many rules that he finds it difficult ever to see anything else. If among them are included some rules on preserving his individuality while he's following all the other rules, what can that mean to him? If his teachers perchance present technique as tools, not rules, they load so many of them upon his

trustful back that he can not walk, to say nothing of mastering the tools.

The essence of their damage lies in two things:

First, the rules they pour forth so endlessly they themselves got from some one else and accept them chiefly for that reason. Ask them the *why* of each of their rules and there is likely to be a considerable hiatus between their last book and the next.

Too often they seem to have been merely perpetuating an hereditary collection of rules for the sake of preserving the collection as an entity in itself, forgetting that some of the rules might be unsound and neglecting—if they ever thought about them—to give their students the foundations in human nature upon which the sound ones must rest.

Second, the whole tendency of such teaching is to make the learner look at other writers instead of within himself, to absorb other people's style and methods instead of developing his own, to copy rather than to think things out for himself, to be artificial rather than natural, cramped rather than free, to waste his time on details instead of giving it to vital things.

I should venture no such strong condemnation if I did not feel that I am merely voicing the opinion of most editors—of the men and women who are in best position to note the devastating effects upon to-day's fiction. And I am, of course, speaking of the books and teaching methods as a class. There are exceptions, naturally—though one writer, for example, tells me he has read between forty and fifty books on fiction writing, finding only one of them worth while—and practically all such books can be of use, sometimes of very great use, to the raw beginner. So can a rhetoric or a common English grammar.

In the light of results, the fundamental point these books most fail to make is that most of their contents should be read—not memorized or swallowed—for stimulus and suggestion only, and that the student must see to it that no rules turn him aside from his main business of developing and *using* his own individuality.

I am painfully aware that in this book I, too, have given rules as rules, but I have tried to give the foundations of a sufficient number of them to lead the student into the habit of looking for foundations himself and working

out his own destiny. For the foundations I ask consideration, for my rules none at all except as danger-signs erected from twenty years' experience to point out the errors most common in actual practise.

I am still more keenly aware that in many instances I fail to meet possible objections and justified exceptions. Often it is because I fail to think of them at the time or never thought of them, but often it is because there is a limit to available space and because too many aspects and too much detail breed confusion. Literature is the communication, between human beings, of human nature and human experience. Who can give complete rules for a process and content so infinitely various? Bear in mind first, last and always, that this book does not attempt to be a complete treatise on writing fiction. Its purpose is to emphasize those points and points of view that, from years of examining the actual manuscripts submitted to magazines, seem most to need emphasis, and, second, to raise against the present fashion in teaching methods a small flag of revolt under which I believe most editors and most discriminating readers will be content to stand, no matter

how great may be their disagreement with me on specific points.

*Unfamiliarity with Things Taught.*—Last week I borrowed three books on the writing of fiction and ran through their pages. One was by a university professor who gave a most interesting picture of the editorial world, of its offices, their occupants, customs, rules, policies, points of view. The title-page stated that he had formerly been with a publishing house—probably for the sake of the experience, during a summer vacation. I became fascinated, almost wishing I could live in that world myself. I never have.

I realize that, for those entirely unfamiliar with the inside of the editorial world, his picture of it was sufficiently near the truth to be of decided practical value. Yet his almost glib generalities and his choices for particularization made me shudder for the misapprehensions that might arise from them. He was like the European traveler who spends a month or two in the United States and then describes and explains it to the world. Any conscientious editor of long experience would, I think, hesitate before attempting to present in a chapter or two of a text-book for earnest

students a complete and final exposition of the editorial field. It is too complex, too various, too changeable.

And if these teachers venture to expound so much and so finally from so small a knowledge of what may be called the mere machinery of the editorial world, it seems logical to conclude that they may have equally insufficient basis when they attempt to explain what kind of fiction the editors want and how to manufacture it.

*Evils of Models and Examples.*—But what struck me most forcibly in those three books was the vast amount of space given to models and examples. Stories were constantly being laid upon the operating table, in whole or part, and dissected and analyzed. The pages were strewn with dismembered parts, ticketed and labeled, to be sure, and filed in most orderly fashion, but the panorama as a whole was enough to ruin a writer forever if it did not drive him mad. Oh yes, I know we must take a clock apart before we can learn how to make a clock, but an artist should live in a studio, not an operating-room. The use of examples and models is a valuable adjunct of teaching, but it is not teaching. As far as

I can learn from cursory glances from time to time, through inquiry and through noting results in submitted manuscripts, dissected models and examples form the backbone of teaching method. Use them, by all means, but only sufficiently to show the student how to do his own analyzing when he feels the need. And teach him general principles to make him keen to the need when it is there. Teach *him* to work; don't litter his mind with the work you've done on a third person's work.

The mechanical method of teaching is perfectly adapted to those students who by no possibility can be anything but mechanical writers, working by rule of thumb, building a structure by foot-rule and pouring in its contents from a graduated beaker. But is producing such writers worth while or even justifiable? Even if your purpose is the broader, industrial one of adding to the general earning capacity of the nation? Of course, if you are merely writing a text-book that will sell—

It is upon the writers who are *not* doomed by their own limitations to be merely mechanics that the curse of mechanical teaching



falls. The genius and the really strong individualist will escape, but what of him with moderate or even considerable gifts? He goes into the bed of Procrustes. He is lopped here, stretched there; he is badgered and blinded with examples and precedents, kept from natural development and natural expression by the study of rules for growth and by listening to other people express themselves, prevented from being himself and giving rein to his own individuality by the constant study of individualities not his own. If only you could sit for a year at some editorial desk and see these poor maimed fellows come in endless line with their pathetic, lifeless wares! Well-made stories, so much so that they are almost exactly like all other well-made stories, but in them here and there a still unsmothered spark that might have been a flame. And after the procession has filed up to you for a while it is not the properly built stories they lay on your desk that you see, but those countless other stories that will never be laid on any desk. It is like looking out over the world of children who can never be born, the better children, the dream children, who could make the world so much

better if only they were here. If you could sit for a year at some editorial desk, you would join with me in saying, "Damn such teaching methods!"

*Individuality and Naturalness First.*—You who are learning to write—and writers are always learning if they are worthy of their name—put this little rule at the head of all your list of rules and let no rule that follows seem to you one-half so well worth clinging to: EXPRESS YOUR NATURAL SELF NATURALLY.

Believe me, it is worth clinging to, even at the cost of aches and bruises. As for all the other rules, accept only those grounded solidly in human nature and take for your guides, not the rules, but their foundations. If you find yourself drifting into the stilted dialect so many feel must be assumed on entering the printed page, tear up what you have written and say your say in your own words. Maybe the result will be sad indeed; there are always many things to learn. But in your learning you will find no secret of technique, no trick of the trade, that is not second in importance to the prime necessity of developing and expressing your own individuality. If they hold before your eyes some story by De Maupassant, Stevenson, Kipling, O. Henry,

look by all means and study what you see, but be sure that your strongest reaction is, "Yes, these are deft uses of tools, masterly handlings of thought, and I will be awake to similar opportunities in my own work, *but* the fact remains that what I have seen is only De Maupassant using his tools, Stevenson using his, and the others each his own. I am not De Maupassant or Stevenson or Kipling or O. Henry or anybody else except myself. I can't possibly ever be any of them, and if I try to be any of them I can't be even myself. Perhaps their tools and devices are not the ones best adapted to my case, though they may prove valuable. Now I'll go back to *my* work."

And if they ask you to look at many other workmen, refuse utterly. Do your own looking. You probably know far better than they what it is you need to look for; if you don't know where to look for it, then ask. You'll probably be looking enough without any one's driving you to it. And, always, when you look, carry away with you only what you can absorb. Undigested food of this kind will kill you.

*Being "Literary."*—Don't try to be "literary" until you know what being "literary"

really means. Most writers do not know. I'm not sure that I know, but certainly I know a few things it is and a few things it is not.

It is not being queer for the sake of queer-ness. It is not using large and learned words. It is not getting as far away as possible from the language of life. It is not thinking, feeling or talking artificially instead of naturally. It is not the copying of others. It is not either wallowing in strong emotions or daintily avoiding them.

It is telling things as *you* see or feel them. It is using the words that accomplish this with least lost motion, words so natural and familiar you are *sure* they are exact to the case. It is the preserving, developing and expressing of *your own* individuality.

Style? Be yourself and your style will be born of itself. Be anything else and, instead of style, you will attain only an acrobatic performance. There are enough acrobats already, and enough people who are not themselves.

I should like to add, with some bitterness, that a knowledge of plain English grammar, even for writers who consider themselves "arrived," is an almost necessary step toward being "literary."

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE READER AND HIS IMAGINATION

WHEN you read a story you live more or less in its story world. There are printed words on the page and they cause your imagination (I do not use the word in the sense of "fancy" but to indicate the mental power that chooses and discards among certain things to construct certain other things) to build from your own experience a set of mental images or impressions. The story's world becomes real to you in proportion as the story's words succeed in making you reproduce it in your mind.

*Variation in Visualization.*—But the success of the story's words in doing this is dependent not only on the skill and power of their stimulus but also on *the ability of your imagination to respond*. Success is dependent not only on the writer but on the reader.

Readers vary tremendously in the funda-

mental ability of their imaginations to respond, both as to quality and degree. It is surprising that this fact is so little known, for its careful consideration is of the utmost importance to success in writing fiction. While my questionings have been only casual, I have not yet found either a writer or an editor who took this variation as a serious factor in his work or who had even discovered the existence of the variation. Wherefore my gratitude is the deeper to Professor Joseph Villiers Denney for having brought it to my attention in a college class a quarter of a century ago.

If you have not already investigated, make the experiment upon your friends. Ask your friends what they *see* when they read a story and you will find amazing variations. Some visualize clearly everything mentioned or suggested—see the characters, actions and scene in full detail just as on a stage or in real life. Others see things and movement, but without colors in their pictures. Some see people but without faces. Some see things only if, and only as fully as, described by the author. Some see fully even if the author fails to describe. Some make their own

images partly different from even definite ones painted by the author, often because he fails to impress his images first. (In the setting of a story, for example, haven't you, if you visualize readily, had to change your picture of the scene's geography or pick up the whole setting and twist it around to make north come where you had had east?) Remember this when *you* are the author, and save your readers this violence to the illusion. Some have a stock imagination-picture that does service for a concept in almost any circumstances. Some see *practically nothing*—can not shut their eyes and see the very room in which they are sitting or even the faces of their nearest and dearest.

I knew a high-school valedictorian who easily mastered every subject until she came to solid geometry. In that study she could not even make a start, was totally helpless—simply because she was constitutionally incapable of looking at the two-dimension page and seeing, in her imagination, the third dimension. She got raw potatoes, cut them up to represent the three-dimension figures and had no further trouble. Another woman overcame the same difficulty

by the same vegetable route. I know an artist, very successfully designing stage-settings, who can not "tell how things will look" unless he looks at them, or pictures or models of them, with his physical eye.

Yet most writers attempt to reach all these types of imagination without giving the matter a thought! Generally they calmly take it for granted that every one of their readers has exactly the same qualities and limitations of imaginative visualization as themselves! What rich opportunities are lost! Here is a matter in which you should *not*, without very careful consideration, write things merely as you see them, at least when it comes to revision, unless your way of seeing them happens to be the way that is most effective with most people.

Each author has his individual qualities in this respect. When he paints his word pictures he tends to use only as many strokes of his brush as make a complete and satisfying picture for *him*. But how complete or satisfying will that picture be to the majority of readers who may not even approximate his qualities of imaginative visualization? The words he has set down give *him*



the picture, but will they give it to others? He can not test out the visualization of the entire population, but he can at least assign himself a fairly definite place in the relative scale, scrutinize his word pictures from the point of view of those of different powers and probably revise his painting methods so that his stories will gain surprisingly in popular appeal, either by additional touches or by changing the relative proportion of the various kinds of stimulus.

A certain writer of western stories found that his work made a strong appeal to those it interested at all, but that the size of his audience was far less than seemed justly merited. Apparently all the elements of good fiction were present. But, if he had considered his readers' psychology in other respects, he certainly had not done so as to visualization. He himself could reread his words and from them see his story world in full. So could I, for we both happened to have the type of imagination that visualizes readily and fills gaps when needed. But many readers haven't this type and, as finally became apparent, these were largely the ones who had failed to become part of

his normal audience. For he had not drawn any visual pictures for those who need them. To them his story people were merely names and dispositions, without clothes or bodily appearance, that did dim things in unseen places. The author had deemed it waste of words to describe things that were—to him—seen of themselves. It was difficult to get him to “pad” his stories with visualizing descriptions, but when he began adding them his audience began to grow.

*Variation in Other Imaginative Powers.*—You will find that probably a minority have imaginations that reproduce not only visual impressions but those of the other senses. Some can hear the sounds of a story—not merely have an intelligent concept of sounds mentioned, but actually hear them almost as clearly as if they were actual physical sounds. Some can taste *via* their imaginations, with such vividness that their mouths water. Some can smell the odors in a story they read. Some can reproduce the impressions that register through the sense of touch—smoothness, friction, impact, pressure.

I hope to have for a later volume some statistics that will give some idea of the rel-

ative frequency of the reproduction of the senses. In any case, the great opportunity for loss or gain of hold on readers offered through visual imagination is considerably multiplied by the cases of the four other senses. The field as a whole is so important it is almost incredible that it does not play a main part in all teaching of fiction writing. Appeal to the senses may possibly be included, though I've not chanced on it in my cursory glances at text-books, but, as previously stated, up to this writing I've happened to find no writer who has even considered the variation in sense-imagination among readers.

I recall a statement in Professor Denney's thesis class to the effect that analysis would show the most popular poets, like Burns and Longfellow, to be as a rule strongly marked by their imagination appeal to all or most of the five senses. Is there any reason why a similarly broad appeal in the case of prose would not reap like results? The case would seem to be stated thus: The more fully you reach a reader, the more fully you reach him.

Suppose your imagination sees and hears,

but does not smell, taste or touch. Look at one of your own stories. Have you given comparatively few pictures or stimuli to your readers' visual and auditory imagination, perhaps taking it for granted that all readers would supply them fully and satisfactorily, as you do? Or have you, simply absorbed in your own personal equation, failed to put into your story any considerable number of stimuli to smell, taste and touch imaginations? In either case, consider how greatly you have weakened your story.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE PLACE OF ACTION IN FICTION

AS PEOPLE progress in culture there is a strong tendency more and more to consider physical action in fiction crude. This is unfortunate—and unthinking.

*Action Considered Unliterary.*—The cause, I think, is twofold. First, most of the crudest published fiction relies to a great extent on action. It is natural and illogical to construct the following syllogism:

All crude fiction is action.

Crudity is poor art.

Therefore action is poor art.

Second, as a race develops in civilization and culture it nearly always tends to lose vigor, drifts further and further away from physical action and more and more into ease, inactivity and softness. It also tends more and more to nicety and detail and

away from the elemental. Physical action is elemental and inclined to sweep nicety and detail aside. Naturally both critics and writers come to consider action crude, something behind and beneath them. Consequently, as a rule, only the lower-grade writers use much action. Consequently action stories as a whole sink to a still lower level. Consequently readers feel still more justified in considering action crude. But is it?

*False Culture.*—Things would be vastly simplified and improved if all who think they know what really constitutes good literature really did know. Nine out of ten have for sole standard the opinions of others. The “others” are fallible, many of them distinctly unreliable. The nine are, of course, unable to tell whose or which opinions are worth while. None of them does any real thinking of his own and most of them do not even make the attempt. There are nine of them who do not to one who does think and does know. The resulting standard is painful. Also artificial and unsound.

A sad feature is that their methods tend to unify their opinions and thus give them the preponderating influence in shaping the

opinions of all the people who don't pretend to know. Professional critics being comparatively few, each critic sways many sheep. Also, the sheep have been referred, rightly enough, to the *Atlantic* as the "most literary magazine in America." They accept its standard without discrimination or understanding. If a piece of fiction is different, in any way, from the fiction of the *Atlantic*, they therefore consider it unliterary. Worst of all, many of those who judge by *Atlantic* standards have a bare bowing acquaintance with that most excellent magazine.

Now the *Atlantic*, for all its scope and splendid humanness, in some respects savors of the library rather than of the rough world at large. Critics, being human, and being generally compelled to do a lot of criticizing, weary of the everlasting fundamentals and seek relief in attention to the niceties and curlycues, these being, also, more plentifully at hand. The sheep herded by the critics and by the *Atlantic* "habit" naturally come to look down, way down, upon the action story.

Also, popular demand for action in fiction

continues strong. It is a cardinal tenet of the unliterary literary person's belief that anything popular is therefore low. I shall not be surprised if some day all fiction that interests in any way is condemned because the popular demand is for fiction that interests.

Still another factor is at work. In clinging blindly to the classics as standards and models many fail to discriminate either in recognizing just which qualities in a classic entitle it to lasting place or in allowing for the difference between the time in which it was written and our own times. Some of its qualities stand forever, but in many cases other qualities lack that permanence of appeal and are very distinctly tuned to its own era. Is the verbosity of a century or two ago, or the sentimentality of the early Victorian period, in key with the spirit and genius of this century? How could it be when our whole civilization has rushed us into a hundred fold greater speed and intensity, surrounded us with a million incentives to practical activity and hurry? Railroads, steamships, trolleys, autos, modern newspapers, motion-pictures, telephones, telegraphs,



wireless, electricity and machinery in general, these have geared us to a far faster pace. We can no longer travel naturally in stage-coaches. *The Vicar of Wakefield*, allowing it its excellencies, is no longer geared to living man. Therefore, in that respect, it is not a classic, not permanent, should not be even a subconscious model.

And in the choosing of books to be labeled classics the natural inadaptability of the old generation to the new, together with the tendency to limit "literature" to products refined away from elementals instead of merely away from crudities, has still further cast action into disrepute.

All in all, the action story has a pretty hard time of it nowadays if it dares plead any claim to being literature.

*Fundamental Tests.*—Yet, if the test of literature be its permanent appeal to human beings, regardless of changing times, the action story fares at least as well as the best.

To be permanent an appeal must reach the only things that are permanent and universal in human beings, the only permanent and universal things are the elementary, fundamental ones, and "action" meets that

test at least as well as anything else. Undoubtedly the race was acting before it was psychologizing or even talking.

If proof of this fundamental and everlasting hold is needed, witness the wide-spread, undying demand for action stories. Also note the fact that most of the classics that have lived longest are crammed full of action—Homer, Virgil, any of the epics or sagas. No, they don't live because of that alone, but could they have lived without it?

If you think that, for all their culture, the most sophisticated and literary specimens among us have really grown beyond the reach of the action appeal, you are much mistaken. Try them, when no one is looking, with a good action story, even one unsanctified as a classic. Scratch the skin and you'll find red corpuscles in even the most anemic blood. Somewhere deep in each of them is the impulse to do, and the admiration for doing. As children they gave it natural outlet; has the leopard changed his spots? Neither restraint nor veneer, neither pose nor inactive living, can eradicate this thing the child was born with.

I've particular reason to speak on that

point. *Adventure* was founded with the primary purpose of meeting this action demand on the part of the more cultured classes, the people whose normal reading is of the "highbrow" variety but who habitually turn at odd moments to stories of action, who accept "trashy" stories if no better offer, but prefer stories sufficiently well done to stand the test of their sophistication. The fact that the magazine's secondary appeal is to those of less literary sophistication and franker interest in the elementals in no way invalidates the primary aim or seems to limit its success. It is difficult to say which of these classes is naturally the more given to writing letters to magazines, but it is difficult to say which of them is the more heavily represented in my correspondence basket.

The latter, I suppose, depends upon where you attempt to draw a hard and fast line between the two classes. Professional men of all classes form a large part of the audience—physicians, lawyers, educators, scientists, engineers, statesmen, ministers and priests; letters from those of undoubted culture in the ordinary sense of that word are very

strongly in evidence; more than once the definite, concrete statement has been volunteered that "I read only two magazines—*Atlantic* and *Adventure*." Yet, personally, I find it not always easy to say that this general class has a keener sense for what seem to me the essential literary values. More articulate and with better opportunity for comparisons, yes; but with point of view more obscured by their sophistication. However, there is no doubt as to the common action appeal to both extremes of the audience, and nearly a dozen years have eradicated my last doubt of action response beneath even the heaviest venter of culture.

Its audience is about eighty-five per cent. men, but other action magazines, aimed at both sexes, have audiences nearly equally divided as to sex. Eliminate sex appeal, the love element, and, even with women, action appeal will take first place.

*What Is Fiction Elementally?*—Elementally a story is a narrative. A narrative implies events, is a record of action, not a treatise, a laboratory record or a post-mortem.

*The Rightful Place of Action in Literature.*—In addition to its claim to place in the best

literature because of its fundamental and permanent appeal and in addition to its being the essence of narrative, there is one thing more to be said.

In its crudest expression you may consign it to what depths you please, but in its essence, in its potentialities, I challenge you to deny it the highest rank of all as material of fiction. For *action is the crystallization of psychology*. It is the ultimate, final expression of character, of all a character has thought, felt and said, of all a character is or can be. Physical action. It need not be exciting and adventurous. It may be expressed negatively, through repression. But psychology, character, morals, what you will, none of these has been really born into the world, has borne recognizable fruit, until it has in some manner acted physically, or taken physical shape through action.

It follows that, in literature at its best, action must be the perfect, logical, inevitable and complete result and register of all psychology of the characters in relation to all circumstances and conditions of the story. No other element of literature has so difficult a test to meet, for, aside from its own de-

mands, it must be *the final and exact expression of everything else in the story.*

Yet the action story is sweepingly condemned as a type!

*The Place of Action in Practise.*—Nothing can make more plain the indiscriminating contempt for action as fiction material than the actual practise of most writers. Action being in its crude form the simplest material as well as the most natural, the majority of writers begin with it. Generally, as they gain in skill they develop, at about equal rate, the idea that all action is crude and that real progress lies in abandoning it as rapidly as possible. In many cases the result is merely the absence of fairly good action stories and the creation of very sad but very “literary” productions. In nearly all cases the cause of the change is due to failure to understand action’s potentialities and rightful place, and the result of that lack of understanding is generally failure to produce the real literature intended.

By all means try to rise above the crude “Diamond Dick” type of action story, but be sure you can substitute something better, aside from improved technique. Better a

story of rather crude but convincing action than a miserable mess of half-baked psychology and falsely glittering "literary finish" whose chief proof of literary quality must be its freedom from physical action. If you sincerely intend to do real literature, get firmly into your head the truth that action should be the perfect crystallization of all else in your story and then use as much or as little of it as is needed for that crystallization. If you try that, you will get an extreme test of all the literary ability you can summon, and if you succeed, you will have attained what only the comparative few are capable of attaining. Even to make a start you must rid yourself of the absurd idea that action *per se* is unliterary.

*Popular Demand.*—Since the Great War popular demand for action fiction is stronger than ever, despite the strong antipathy for material directly connected with it and despite a definite reaction in favor of quiet, peacefulness and things spiritual.

If it's popular demand you're considering, consider this: Real life, perhaps now more than ever before, consists very largely of restraints and inhibitions. Human nature is

just as human as it ever was—there are just as many things in it to be restrained and inhibited. And, underneath all our civilization, we're just as tired of having to do it—probably more so, since our civilization is more civilized and therefore more exacting than its predecessors. If we can't escape from the fetters in real life, can't be free to follow our undoubted impulses, as readers we'll all the more welcome a chance for vicarious freedom.



## CHAPTER XVI

### ADAPTATION OF STYLE TO MATERIAL

IF THE theory suggested by the chapter head had not withstood the test of ten years and the judgment of a number of people whose judgment is worth having, I should not venture to present it here even in brief space, for if carried into practise it would more or less revolutionize the art of fiction. Perhaps, too, it has already been advanced, though I have never happened to run across it or to hear of it through others.

In an earlier chapter was the statement that the art process of fiction consists of three steps—Material, Artist and Reader and that the third step fails to get anything approaching due consideration in either theory or practise. This book is largely an attempt to emphasize this fact and a plea that the reader be given greater importance in the teaching of fiction writing.

While working out and testing this theory of the reader's place in creative work I was testing out also another theory which seemed to have little connection with the first and, with my perspective ruined by specialization, it was only a year or two ago the almost self-evident fact dawned upon me that the two fitted neatly into each other and constituted a complete theory of the art process. Until then each had been locked away in its own little compartment, there being no intent of building up a rounded out whole.

While the first theory dealt with neglect of the reader in the general art process, the other centered on the neglect of material as an influence on style. In other words, writers seemed too concentrated on themselves, the Artists, in the creative process and too neglectful of the two other steps, Material and Reader.

*Rigidity of Style as to Material.*—To present the matter briefly, all that an author has to convey to you comes to you through a single medium which we call his style and which in practise is singularly inelastic in relation to the great variety of things that must pass through it. Take Maurice Hewlitt in

his earlier days when his accentuated and highly individualized style make him a good example. Through that one unchanging style had to come to you tragedy, comedy, pathos, contemplation, action, love, hate, patience, anger, romance, satire. All the gamut of human emotions in the material must be crushed into uniformity of expression before it could reach you, losing of its own essence in the process. All must be translated into the one inflexible rhythm and jingle of that one style—standardized, as it were, out of much of their individuality and strength. Such a loss is a calamity, and, I think, to a marked degree unnecessary.

In poetry the need of guarding against this loss is definitely recognized, if not as a broad principle, at least in adaptation of sound to sense and in selection of the metrical form best adapted to a given theme. Why should it not be at least equally guarded against in prose? Many of the distinguishing qualities of poetry as opposed to prose vary with different races and with the march of time. Of the universal, permanent distinguishing qualities are there any that should differentiate poetry from prose as to the importance

of the Material's influence on style in transmission of Material to Reader through Artist?

That there are already in our fiction occasional and sporadic cases of this adaptation of style to material shows the soundness of the theory, for these examples are evidently not for the most part the result of studied effort but instances in which the writer's art is sufficiently developed to break through his usual style and spontaneously adapt expression to the thing expressed.

There are even stray rules pointing in this direction, but chiefly for dialogue where a demand for adaptation makes itself felt through the need of making a character express his emotions as a real person would express them in real life. For example, the use of short sharp sentences and simple Anglo-Saxon words in most cases of emotional stress.

But if you wish an example of what adaptation of style to material is capable of accomplishing if used as a fixed and general principle of composition, turn to Shakespeare, forgetting the non-essential fact that he is a poet.

*Style in Relation to Material.*—Style is the expression of material through the artist, of material as transmuted through his individuality. He is, if you like, a part of his material, but, on that basis, he divides cleanly into two parts, one of them, the artist, expressing the other, the material. What I object to is the attempt to express through a single, inelastic style *all* of his material, *all* of himself as material, or *all* of himself as artist. There *is* no one style that can even approximate perfect expression of all that is in the world.

Do tragedy, comedy, pathos, love, anger, excitement, calm speak the same language in real life? Must not human art at least approximate human life if only by a kind of symbolism? What writer, or any other human being, can approximate expression of all of himself through the intoning of any one single style? Does he go from cradle to grave in one single chord? Does he not respond to emotions, his own or other people's, as a harp to hand? And yet, God save the mark, when he comes to write he calmly tries to squeeze death and all living into a single monotone!

Is literature merely the click of a telegraph key, crushing all juice from life to reduce all life to its own inflexible code and flat rhythm? Is an author merely a funnel through which all the juice of life must emerge at the small end in a single thin stream?

*Demands of Unity.*—Art's demand for unity is fundamental and not to be denied, but what has been our idea of unity of style? Merely to whistle one note and call it a satisfactory expression of the author and the universe. It can not be. And to attain this one note in a story we place no limit to the violence needed to make all human emotions give up their own individuality in order to be in key. It is well enough, as far as it goes, but it is only a first crude step. It is time we took a step beyond.

Can any artistic demand for unity be based on any elemental more fundamental and indisputable than the irreconcilable difference of opposite human emotions?

Let the author mold his material to his individuality, unify it through himself, express it through his individual style. Let him mold his material into unity around what single

thought or emotion he please before he passes it through his style. But let him make that style, not a single inflexible note, but a tune, a tune that sings high or low, loud or soft, in majors or minors, harmony or discord, fast or slow, expressing in delicate response the varying emotions of its song through the singer, itself a unity and an expression and in each of its parts a unity and expression of that part.

*Let Your Style Respond.*—If you are sincere in your work, if you really feel your material and if you are not so ridden and oppressed by rules that you can not be natural, your style will of its own accord tend to attune itself to what it expresses. Give it the chance, encourage it to do so. Let no rule of misinterpreted unity force it into one monotonous, inflexible note impervious to all the emotions of the material that strive to break through into expressions of themselves so that they themselves can reach the reader in something of the fulness and color of reality instead of in the shape of cold line drawings.

Let your tune follow the moods of what it sings about. If in your material comes tragedy after a grayness of every-day affairs,

will your song ripple on in unchanged measure? Why not let the tragedy come through into the song itself? Let each mood of your material come through into your song and to your reader. If there follows a relief scene of comedy, how much of comedy will fail to reach the reader if it fails to tinge even the medium of transmission?

If you are not musician enough to compose the various elements of material into your style-tune, at least you can approximate by the use of notes you know produce the general effect and are keyed to the mood you desire to reproduce in your reader—rhythm changed to smoothness or harshness, sentence-length changed to that generally used in real life for the expression of that mood, words chosen for slowness and weight or speed and lightness, skilful use of adaptation of sound to sense, few words for speed of action, many for waiting and suspense.

*The Need of Emphasizing the Relation of Style to Material.*—All these things are done—a little—by a few. These few are of the real artists. It is because they are real artists that their material finds expression in their style. It is not because responsiveness



of style to material is systematically taught. It should be, if American fictionists are to attain the development their natural advantages make possible to them. It is the art of artists that most deserves teaching so far as it can be taught, particularly if it is so potent that it pushes its way without encouragement and against heavy odds of hindering rules.

I have only outlined the need and the possibilities and, I fear, made a poor case of it. But some day some one else will give it full and convincing presentation—if, indeed, some one has not already done so outside my knowledge. In any case, there lies a line of development that sooner or later fiction is bound to follow.

Whether you believe it or not, give it slow consideration in your mind. Even if you decide against it in the end, the considering of it will teach you more concerning style than you are likely to get from the study of other people's rules.

Of *that* I am very sure. In your case *you* are the most important authority. Appeal to that authority and see that it gives judgment, judgment reasoned out, by *you*, from funda-

mentals. Let no rules by other people impose themselves until *you* have reasoned out their worth. Keep and develop *your own* individuality.

And the one best way to learn to write is to—write.

I hereby absolve you from all rules in this book except such rules as warn against rules.

THE END

## APPENDIX

### YOUR MANUSCRIPTS AND THE EDITORS

TO NEW writers, and to most old ones, a magazine editorial office is, among other things, a mystery, not the least mysterious of its contents being the editors. It is, of course, no more mysterious than the office of any other specialized business, and editors are merely one small class among many classes doing various kinds of specialized work. Certainly there seems no justification for the traditional awe in which editors are held by so great a majority of people. This awe is undeniably present and does more than a little to prevent more comfortable relations between writers and readers on one hand and editors on the other. Partly it is a "hang-over" from a past age when editors better earned an atmosphere of awe as individual molders of public opinion, and partly it is due to people's insistence on regarding with a peculiar and indiscriminating reverence

anybody or any thing connected, however remotely, with "literature."

It shouldn't be necessary to say so, but, if the testimony of one of them can be accepted by those who persist in considering them something very much above—or below—the normal, editors are just ordinary humans no different in essentials from any other people of ordinary education. As in any collection of people, there are all kinds among us, even those who breathe a rarified atmosphere and hold themselves superior to their fellows, but, heavens, think of waiters you have known! While as to barbers and policemen—

Just humans, whose job happens to be that of trying to choose from many manuscripts those the reading public will like best. If the manuscripts they handle happen to be fact articles as well as fiction, there is also the job of selecting with an idea of education, or of advancing some cause or principle advocated by the particular magazine, but even here there is also the job of pleasing the reading public. Besides that, if the editor has a plain or social conscience, the desire to leave people the better, rather than the worse, for their reading. That's all.

A word more about that job, so that we editors may not seem quite so mysterious, inconsistent, arbitrary and other things as we do at present. Take the editor of any fiction magazine—or any magazine, for that matter. So long as he works on that particular magazine his job is, generally speaking, not to test a manuscript by its general literary or its general magazine merits, nor to choose according to his own personal tastes, but, to the best of his ability, to choose first according to its suitability to *that particular magazine*. If John Jones is editor of magazine B and then becomes editor of magazine C, his manuscript tests will change instantly. He will accept some stories he rejected for B and reject some others that he would gladly have taken for B. That is, if John is a good editor and has not deliberately taken up the task of making C as much like B as possible.

Each fiction magazine aims at a special type of reader, or a special group of readers. Therefore it tries to individualize itself in such manner as to get and hold the interest of *that* type. Its “policy” may undergo changes, but it is always a more or less in-

dividualized one. What is one magazine's meat may be another magazine's poison.

There are other reasons why the rejection of a manuscript is "not necessarily a reflection upon its merits." It may fall fairly within the individualized field of a magazine and be recognized by the editor as of entirely sufficient merit, yet be sent back. A grocer or a druggist or a delicatessen man acts exactly the same way. If one hundred cans of corn is the number a grocer is justified by sales in carrying on his inventory and he already has one hundred cans of corn, he doesn't buy any more cans. If an editor estimates that his readers' demand justifies him in buying about fifty love-stories, five tragic stories, ten business stories, etc., per year and he already has in stock the full quota of each that should be on hand at any one time, he, like the grocer, buys no more of these types.

Length, as well as type, is also a factor that an editor must consider in the light of his inventory.

Of course, there are all kinds of exceptions in applying the inventory test to manuscripts, for stories are not standardized like

cans of corn nor do all magazines adhere to so rigid a basis of selection. Then, too, there is the fact that some types are, permanently or temporarily, difficult to secure and, when sufficiently well executed, are likely to be seized upon at any time. Really good humorous stories, being notoriously difficult to find, would hardly be rejected even by a magazine with its normal supply of humorous stories already in the safe.

Also, manuscripts come in waves, not only as to number but as to setting, material, theme, and so on. For six months, a year, three years, there may be, for example, an oversupply of stories of diplomatic life, rural stories, stories laid in Latin America, and a dearth of stories of golfing, stories of olden times, sea stories. By the end of a year or two the situation may be completely reversed on any or all of these types. In most cases the change from dearth to plenty or *vice versa* is without warning or discernible cause. After being caught by a few dearths an editor is likely to stock up with a reserve on types that have shown themselves subject to fluctuation in supply. On the other hand, he may decide that writers as a whole, in

their fancy or lack of fancy for a type, are a fairly safe index to the fancy of the public in general.

In any case, many factors besides merit, recognized or unrecognized, and besides bad judgment by editors, decide the fate of manuscripts. On the other hand, most manuscripts are rejected for the all sufficient reason that they do lack sufficient merit.

Some ideas are prevalent that seem worth meeting.

A "pull" is seldom of service in gaining acceptance for manuscripts; of none at all so far as my observation extends, and I can not now recall, even from hearsay, any case in which "pull" took the place of merit. Doubtless there are such instances, but, ethics aside, progress through "pull" is not worth a writer's practical consideration. Many beginners believe they will get a better hearing for their stories if they present them in person instead of mailing them. It's an editor's business to select manuscripts according to their values, not according to his opinion of their authors, and I think most editors do so. If he is subject to personal influence, don't forget that you may make an



unfavorable, instead of a favorable, impression. In any case you're taking from him time that he probably needs badly and is not likely to be happy over losing. What you have to say to him can almost always be said equally well by letter, perhaps far better. A letter takes less of his time and—he can choose his time for reading it.

I know of no fiction magazine that has a "regular staff" of writers in the sense of its having no opening for new writers. Often a magazine comes to depend for the bulk of its supply upon a comparative few who have proved themselves best able to provide that supply, but that does not mean that it hasn't a welcome for others.

The oft-heard wail that "a new writer has no chance with editors" is merely silly. Weren't all the "old" writers once new? How, pray, did they gain their first footing? In one sense, to be sure, new writers have little chance with editors for the sweet and simple reason that a majority of beginners haven't sufficient merit to earn them a chance with any competent, fair-minded judge. Some of them will never have. Some have not yet developed and are worthless to

magazines until they do. If a writer can't develop unless encouraged by acceptances before he has developed, he almost surely hasn't in him the ability to develop in any circumstances.

Don't be discouraged by rejections. They are merely the usual thing. They only class your manuscript among the eighty-five to ninety-nine per cent. that every magazine turns back. Along with yours many manuscripts of successful or even famous authors are rejected, and some of these rejected stories, possibly yours among them, will be accepted by other magazines. The only disgrace is in being discouraged. If, instead of the usual printed slip, you get a note from one of the staff, be glad, for your manuscript has raised itself above the others and earned attention for its merits; your rejection is really a step forward—the big first step.

Often the beginner's discouragement is due to his trying his wares on the wrong market. Would you try to sell a lady's slippers to a civil engineer, a soldier's boots to a dainty dame of fashion, a policeman's brogans to a child? Yet that is exactly what so many of you try to do with manuscripts. I

am, though an editor myself, quite incapable of saying just which magazines will buy which manuscripts, for an infinite variety of factors and circumstances are involved, but the total ignorance of magazine markets displayed by many beginners can be due to nothing but failure to give the field even a rudimentary consideration before trying to master it.

The elementary rules for the actual submission of manuscripts have been printed thousands of times, but the need for them abides:

Every manuscript should be typewritten. No matter how good handwriting may be, it imposes a heavy handicap on any manuscript, for, in comparison with other manuscripts in typewriting, its story can unfold only on leaden feet even to the most patient, kindly and self-sacrificing editor.

Double-space the typewriting. It reads more easily, allows you sufficient space to make your own alterations and corrections without messing parts of your story into illegibility, and, if the manuscript is bought, gives space for editing it as copy for the printer to follow.

Write on only one side of the paper. This custom is so firmly established that it's folly to violate it and almost no one does. There are plenty of reasons for the custom, but its mere existence is practical reason enough.

Leave a fairly wide margin on the left-hand side of each sheet—as a kindness to the editor in case your manuscript is bought and to the compositor who must read and set what you have written and the editor edited.

Type your name and address on the first page of your manuscript. For common-sense reasons.

Number your pages. Consecutively straight through from beginning to end. Especially if you hope for any chance of detailed criticism from the editor.

Unless your manuscript is to be returned express collect, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope of sufficient size and strength, or at least sufficient postage. As a matter of common honesty. A surprising number of writers are not honest in this respect.

If you write to the editor when you submit a manuscript, see that the letter is enclosed with the manuscript, not sent under separate

cover. If your idea in writing is to further the chances of your story, you're going about it in a poor way if you add to the editor's troubles by making him handle your case in two parts instead of one. Or by making him read your autobiography in full.

Several things will help toward a better understanding of the editorial attitude toward manuscripts. First, tell me, did you ever know a merchant to work hard day after day for the purpose of *avoiding* buying stock for his customers' demands? No, the editor desires to buy; he spends his time trying to get stories, not to avoid them. When he finds one that meets his needs he rejoices. A minority of magazines seek first of all for authors with "big names," because of the following they command among the reading public, but the editors of even these are inclined to pat themselves on the back when they "find" a brand-new author of merit.

Second, to balance the above, remember that your manuscript is merely one among thousands that come to an editor.

There is a wide-spread feeling that many manuscripts are rejected only because they are read, not by the editor himself, but by

some assistant. There are two "schools" of manuscript-reading. One method is to let the most inexperienced readers weed out the bulk of submitted manuscripts, thus saving the more experienced readers much time. The other method reverses the process; a more experienced reader does the first sorting. The latter seems to be gaining ground; personally I believe in it strongly. My own experience may serve to illustrate the situation. For years every manuscript came to my hands first. As their number increased this became a physical impossibility. Manuscript-reading is only one of an editor's many duties, a fact that many lose sight of. At present from one to two working days per week is probably a generous estimate of the time I give to manuscript-reading. The reading is done mostly in bits—in the evenings, on trains, in days spent at home for the purpose. In the office itself I can't get time to read a dozen manuscripts a year. And much of the other kinds of work also is done outside. Many other editors are in similar case.

But in delegating the bulk of the work the most experienced editor on the staff is the one who first reads the stories from "un-

knowns." Except in cases of appeal, stories by our "regular" writers do not pass through his hands at all, but go first to editors of less experience and from them to me.

Some magazines have a special "fiction editor," who is often the court of final appeal, may have been chosen by the editor as superior to himself in this branch of editorial work and may or may not be the first to read manuscripts.

The thing to remember is that if the editor delegates the first reading it does not follow that he minimizes its importance and he generally takes care to put it into as capable hands as he can. Remember, also, the general rule is that a first reader is instructed to mark all doubtful cases for a second hearing; also that it's to his own personal interest to "find" every good story he can if he wishes to hold his job.

How much of a manuscript does a reader read? A sentence, a paragraph, a few pages, maybe all of it. Unfair and inefficient not to read all of each? My personal opinion is that manuscript-reading is one of the things that can be learned by experience only. But, having the experience, an editor can reject

the "culls" very swiftly and with a good deal of sureness. He can tell all the back plots at a glance, knows the kinds of opening that are never followed by a good story, can tell in a few sentences or paragraphs whether a writer has sufficient skill in handling his tools to be able to turn out an acceptable story and—has at his finger-ends all the kinds of material, setting, plot, treatment, etc., that his particular magazine does not use. If in doubt, he reads further or samples it out here and there and glances at the end. If still in doubt, he reads it all. Sometimes knowing the story to be unusable, he reads it all because the author's possibilities are worth serious consideration even if the story in hand isn't.

As to the final reading I think, from what data I chance to have, that I'm not in accord with the majority custom. When I'm familiar with a writer's work and he's fairly steady, the endorsement of the man who passed it over to me is often sufficient, since he too knows that writer's work and would have noted any let-down or doubtful points. In other cases, sometimes a few pages—with maybe a glance at the remainder—is suffi-



cient for rejection, unless the other editor, having read it all, has voted for it or makes the point that we can help the writer revise it into suitable shape. But what I do read I read word for word page after page until I find definite cause for rejection, for I can't believe that I can judge from the reading public's point of view unless I read as I think most of the reading public reads—word for word. Maybe other editors can, but, at least in most cases, I can't.

But be sure of this—whatever their reading methods, editors are trying to find good stories, not to reject them.

Many magazines contract in advance for stories by well-known writers, buying sight unseen and trusting wholly to the writer's steadiness, conscientiousness and popular following. In some cases this is perfectly safe; in others decidedly not. It means, essentially, that the writer has left the merit system and works on a sure-thing basis, which is not good for most writers.

Do not decide that your story was rejected because an editor read it when he was tired or his liver was out of order. Editors get tired and their livers are as undependable as

anybody's liver, but they know this and make allowances accordingly. In fact, it's a pretty safe rule to decide that your story was rejected for lack of merit or for unsuitability to the particular magazine. If not convinced of the former reason, keep sending your story to other magazines. Many a story has been rejected by five, ten, twenty, fifty magazines and yet found an acceptance, perhaps by a better magazine than some of those that rejected it, though the majority of manuscripts submitted probably never find a taker.

Oh, yes, the editor is fallible like everybody else including yourself. But after all he's an expert of experience in his own particular line, experience has given him a perspective you lack, and he has an understanding of his magazine's particular needs that no outsider can have. In the long run you'll make progress faster if, allowing for the fallibility of the genius editor, you decide to accept his verdict as more dependable than that of your friends or yourself. Anyhow, there's more to be gained from looking for weak places in your work than from striving to prove its excellencies by argument.

This is a rambling, hop-skip-and-jump chapter, but there are a thousand little points that bob up one after the other and choosing among them is haphazard work at best. All I've tried to do is to give you a sketchy idea of editorial offices and their working so that sending manuscripts to them will not be quite so much like sending them out into a hostile unknown.



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